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THE FIR AND THE PALM

ELIZABETH BIBESCO

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THE FIR AND THE PALM

A NOVEL

BY

ELIZABETH BIBESCO

AUTHOR OF "I HAVE ONLY MYSELF TO BLAME," "BALLOONS."

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press
1924

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Elizabeth Bibesco

Made in the United States of America

Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam
Im Norden auf kahler Höh'.
Ihn schläfert; mit weisser Decke
Umhüllen ihn Eis und Schnee.

Er träumt von einer Palme,
Die fern im Morgenland
Einsam und schweigend trauert
Auf brennender Felsenwand.

HEINE.

A Fir-tree standing lonely,
  On a naked northern height,
The ice and snow enfold him
  And he sleeps in robes of white:

He is dreaming of a Palm-tree,
  Far in an eastern land,
Who mourns, alone and silent
  On a ridge of burning sand.

HEINE.[1]

[1] My grateful thanks are due to Professor Gilbert Murray who translated the poem at my request.

THE FIR AND THE PALM

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CHAPTER I

"*MADAME la Comtesse est servie.*" Helen wondered whether it was possible that eighteen years of her life had been spent with meals at irregular hours and no inevitable half-past one looming in each day with Jean—the deputy of fate, she called him—announcing lunch in tones which showed without a possibility of doubt that life is a well-regulated, ordered state, and destiny a benign force over which we have no control.

She had not conquered her unpunctuality by a good resolution; there had simply been no room for it in the emptiness of her new life. She could imagine the proportions that it would have assumed in the leisure of the country, and in London the massed formation of her blazing responsibilities seemed to crowd out anything as intimate and unnecessary as a personal habit.

The all-embracing tidiness of her life! She

smiled a little. It was after all what she had wanted. She had run away from jagged edges and frayed nerves and tangled, overlapping emotions; she had wanted her feelings to become a beautifully clipped box-hedge. "Serenity" had been the cry of her youth as "adventure" would perhaps be the cry of her middle age. But for the last five years her heart had been a charming, formal garden, full of old-fashioned flowers, lavender and sweet geranium, thyme and myrtle.

Her husband had wanted her to throw herself into his arms, and instead she had walked up his marble staircase. His passion for her had made him angular and nervous. In his anxiety not to frighten her he had almost frozen himself.

She thought him wonderful, she admired his character, she revelled in his mind, she delighted in the flavour of his personality—of all of which he was forlornly, impotently conscious.

"You are as unlike other people as peppermints are unlike other sweets," she had told him one day.

"You have always had a taste for me," he probed his own wound.

"A positive craving," she laughed.

He didn't show how much it hurt.

"A positive craving," he thought bitterly. "How little she knows what that means."

He was very proud of her, of her wit, of her charm and of a curious, easy, unfathomed power she had over people, invisible threads of influence stretching far afield into strange, unknown territories. Her most obvious gift—that of a hostess—amused and irritated him. "My famous salon," she explained, "is a place where people who don't speak in the street shout one another down."

She was very clear-sighted.

When she was depressed she remembered the many blessings that had been showered upon her, and then she laughed a little sadly. Happiness is the moment when you cease to make an inventory of joys; it is a glow, a brightness—never a list; and she would walk into the garden. She loved flowers.

To-day she felt unreasonably light-hearted with a quiet unfounded sense of adventure in the air. Also Cyril was already four minutes late for lunch.

"I must apologise——"

She turned round and looked at her husband with the gift she had of being able, when she wanted, to look at the people she knew best as if she were seeing them for the first time. He was a good deal greyer than he had been when she married him, and his eyes, always set deeply,

seemed to have sunk still further into his head. His expressive thin lips fitted together more tightly than they had done; certain little wrinkles which had once come and gone with his smiles had decided to stay permanently. Altogether his sensitive, distinguished face seemed to have set into a certain rigidity. He had won his daily battle of suppression.

"I am sorry I am late," he said as she slipped her arm into his, and they walked in to lunch together.

"Think how glad I am," she laughed, "how I welcome every little symptom of fallibility."

She thought she saw a little cloud on his face.

"Your colleague, the Almighty, has given us a lovely day for our bazaar."

"Bazaar? What bazaar?"

"The bazaar that I promised to open at Mrs. Baldwin's."

He sighed. "What extraordinary creatures women are. Not content with pursuing the irrelevant in London till your eyes are small, your feet tired, your voice hoarse and your mind stationary, the first thing you do on coming to the country is to go to a bazaar."

"I am doing my duty as your wife."

"The duty of my wife is to rest."

"The duty of your wife is not to appear a snob."

"The day on which you succeed in being thought a snob, I shall take off my hat to you as the greatest fraud in my extensive acquaintance."

She puckered her eyebrows. "Let me think of another reason. I promised to open the bazaar. A promise is a promise."

"Your promises are merely cases of automatic inability to say no. You think it's kindness, but it's only irresolution."

"Not always. Sometimes it is curiosity."

"Ah!"

"I have never seen the Baldwins and I have never been to Overton since they bought it. Also we none of us ever liked the Overtons and all this nonsense about 'poor Sir Henry' and 'these dreadful *nouveaux riches*' makes me sick. I'm all for a little new blood, and the thought of the Baldwins being too rich to be able to talk lugubriously about the times fills me with joy."

He twinkled at her.

"My dear," he said, "you are the only honest woman I have ever met. Also, as you say, you are my wife, though I naturally resent your indicating that fact as a motive for your sillier plans. However, if you are prepared unreservedly to withdraw all claims to altruism or a sense

of duty, I will give my blessing to your afternoon."

"Darling," she said, "I thank God every day that I am curious. Curiosity is life, curiosity is health, curiosity is hope, curiosity is adventure. Isn't it awful to think that some day I may wake up and not look out of the window and not look at my back hair in a hand-glass and not want to go to the Baldwin's bazaar?"

"It is a prospect that I must, I am afraid, regard without even hope. When the glorious day arrives, you will, I trust, sit down in the library and read Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall' which is an enchanting book, and my confident anticipation that I was marrying an exceptional woman will at last be realised."

They had walked out on to the terrace. Helen stepped in front of him.

"Cyril," she demanded, "do I look nice?"

He always wished she wouldn't ask that.

"I must look," he said drily.

She was standing very erect, stretching her tallness to its full height. The hinting lines of her grey crêpe de Chine dress revealed with delicate touches of emphasis and concealment the rounded slimness of her beautiful young body. A big corn-coloured hat, low on her forehead, almost touched her straight pencilled eyebrows. Her

amber brown eyes were laughing, but her big curly mouth remained discreetly on the brink of a smile. Between the gold-yellow and the grey her skin was absolutely white, and her nails, like pale pink shells, seemed jewels at the end of each finger.

It hurt him to look at her, to be burnt inside with the longing to take her in his arms, to be brutal and primitive and crush her lips and ruffle her hair, and feel her helpless and dishevelled and limp and his.

"You look charming," he said coldly, and she felt a little chill of disappointment.

"It is half-past two," he added. "Have you ordered the motor?"

"Yes," she answered listlessly. "I will go and collect some gloves and some money."

He was in the hall to see her off.

"Don't make too many undesirable friends." He took her hand and kissed it. *"Bonne aventure,"* he said.

. . . . . .

Three men and one woman were sipping their coffee in the library at Overton. Mr. Baldwin, grey and melancholy, was seated on his chair with the air of some one who has involuntarily alighted on some unchosen spot. He always managed to

convey a complete repudiation of his surroundings and a suggestion that his every movement was but a temporary makeshift. Also, possessing the gift of active silence without ever lapsing into rudeness, he contrived to frustrate the most resolute conversational attacks. Lounging on the sofa, a gawky muddle of arms and legs, sprawled his son Ned, a huge fair-headed boy who was just reaching the age at which biographical novels begin to be interesting—and stop. Next to him, with the tidy controlled grace of the athlete, sat his cousin Toby, slim, lithe, not very tall, with brown-red hair crinkled and crisp like a November heap of beech leaves, and long intent queer grey eyes which could light into a smile that neither man, woman nor animal had ever resisted. Opposite him, Mrs Carstairs was leaning forward, thoroughly enjoying her own conversation and the delighted sensation of imparting information.

"You should try and forget everything you have ever heard about her," she explained. "Helen is an enchanting person and the legend and the poster do her infinite harm. Forget the illustrated papers, forget the books that have been dedicated to her. The real ones after all have probably not had her name on the fly leaf. Forget the hearts she has broken—or mended:

the careers she has made—or ruined. Forget that she is powerful or famous or witty. Just make your mind a blank and let her leave her own image on it."

"What an irresistible picture you make." The emphasis of the whole sentence was on the gifts of the describer.

Toby's charming low voice always contained a caress hidden in some part of the intonation, and no woman to whom he addressed even the most trivial remark ever failed to feel that somehow or other (she didn't quite know how) he had meant more than he had said. A semi-unconscious adoption of methods that had invariably been successful had taught him to create almost involuntarily an atmosphere of emotional potentialities, and women to whom he had never given a moment's thought implicitly believed in his delicate discretion without the suspicion of his indifference ever crossing their minds. Toby had the divine gift of making everything dramatically personal. If he talked about disarmament or discussed cricket averages, it was always a confidence bursting with significant intimacy. And men liked him as much as women did. He was a magnificent game player and he had been a magnificent soldier. Those not entirely chloroformed by his charm were able to see a certain crisp unsusceptibility,

a fundamental hardness and ruthlessness. He had a very definite ideal of life which, though it was never subjected to the wear and tear of small occasions, the inevitable chippings of every-day life, nevertheless invariably appeared as the decisive factor when his life had reached a cross-roads. These were frequently the occasions on which he was accused of behaving badly, of sacrificing the individual—usually a woman—without a qualm. But they were moments when the individual was an offering that had inevitably to be made to the general principle, and if he felt remorse at having allowed such a crisis to arise, he never felt regrets at having cut the knot with a sword.

As Mrs. Carstairs bent forward, prepared to supplement her appeal to them to make their minds blank by a slum of details, Mrs. Baldwin came in. Even the most billowy summery clothes contrived to look tight on her, even her lightest, most flowery hats managed to seem heavy. A butterfly in youth, she had become a mosquito in middle age with the remnants of militant charm aggravated by fussiness. The pink and white of her complexion had given way to a spreading railway map of bluish veins. The ethereal fairness of her hair had reached the dangerous gold of middle age.

Mrs. Baldwin was never out of spirits, but she was nearly always out of breath.

"Henry," she said to her husband, gasping importantly, "the moment has arrived."

This phrase occurred so frequently in Mrs. Baldwin's conversation and covered so impartially weddings, christenings, funerals and festivals of the church, that her husband's complete absence of response was perhaps forgivable, but when she added: "I can hear Lady Horsham in the hall," she was gratified to see a ripple of excitement stir the room.

"Lady Horsham."

Helen walked in with the compelling, diffident eagerness that some people found so disarming and others so irritating. She always contrived to make everything seem important and delightful—even more delightful than she had known it was going to be. If she were picking dead leaves off rose bushes she somehow gave you the feeling of being let into a secret; confronted by the common place and the expected, she always appeared wide-eyed with happy surprise.

How well she knew the library at Overton, and the begonias—those little pink begonias that she had always detested. Mrs. Carstairs, too, was an old friend, so devoted, so energetic, such a trial. Mr. Baldwin it was difficult to notice. Ned,

agonisingly shy, it was kinder to overlook. Toby was just a nice-looking, ordinary young man, and Mrs. Baldwin was somehow exactly what she had expected her to be like. And yet Helen's face was lit up, if not with the pleasure she was receiving, at any rate with the pleasure she was about to give.

"It is nice to be here at last," she said, while Mrs. Carstairs gave her a hearty peck and Mr. Baldwin murmured: "Very good of you to come."

"Do you think I might sit down a moment, or would that be too self-indulgent? At any rate you will allow me to come over some other time peacefully, won't you?"

She smiled at her host who mumbled: "Proud, I'm sure."

Mrs. Baldwin buzzed in and out. Finally, "Everything is ready," she gasped. "The Boy Scouts are at attention, the local committee—we have a very strong local committee—is assembled, the Rector has arrived, the band is waiting for you to appear. So, if you will take Mr. Baldwin's arm."

Helen, from force of habit, looked round to see if perhaps lurking somewhere there wasn't some one with whom she could exchange the flicker of a twinkle, and, catching the full blast of Toby's expression, she dropped her eyelashes and

laid her hand with a little caressing gesture on Mr. Baldwin's elbow, as if it were the elbow of all others on which she would have chosen to lean.

The procession moved forward to where the strong local committee—very strong and very local—were waiting to be introduced.

The matron of the Swanborough Infirmary, upholstered in black alpaca and covered with buttons and Red Cross decorations, had submerged the Rector in a torrent of speech; the Mayor was jingling his chains of office disconsolately, wondering why they looked so detached; the very surly daughter of the Vice-Chairman of the blankets committee (popularly supposed to look "just like a picture") was clutching at a bouquet of yellow roses with which she refused to part.

"How lovely!" said Helen. "Are they really for me?"

She looked round as if she felt herself to be surrounded by worthier recipients.

"How did you know that they were my favourite flower, and just what I needed as a liaison between my hat and my dress?"

At the word "liaison" the Rector (who was secretly proud of his French) coughed a little, but at that moment the band struck up "The British Grenadiers," and, shouting confidential whispers at the Mayor, Helen convinced him (as she al-

ways convinced everybody) that he was her one ally in a strange and hostile assembly.

The platform was ultimately reached, and the Mayor made a few introductory remarks. "Lady Horsham," he observed, "is an old friend. (Hear, hear!) She needs no introduction from me (Cheers and cries of 'No' and 'Go on'). When I say old I of course mean young. (Loud laughter.) We remember her when she first came among us a blushing bride in lawful possession of her husband's heart. She soon took unlawful possession of all of our hearts. (Cheers and laughter.) They are hers still (Cheers). But in talking of old friends we must not forget new friends." At this the audience felt slightly bewildered. "We are here to-day owing to the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin. (Hear, hear!) We all know what happens to new friends; they become old friends (Cheers). As for old friends, well—" (the Mayor paused, uncertain how to dispose of them)—"they are always sure of a good hearty Swanborough welcome. I call on Lady Horsham."

Helen explained that no one could really know what a treat it was for her to be there. After all, they had the luxury of seeing one another every day, and to her, alas! it was a comparatively rare pleasure. She noticed that the Mayor had

talked about hearts. She had always suspected that his experience of them was not purely medical (he was a doctor), but not all of us had his double advantage of charm to lead him astray and science to keep him straight. She thought she saw her old friend, the Rector, looking shocked, but she would tell them a secret about the Rector; he was never quite so shocked as he looked.

And so she rambled on with little intimate references to every one, which made every one happy, even an old forgotten anecdote about the matron's parrot leaping providentially to her memory.

When she had finished, the Rector proposed a vote of thanks which was seconded by the matron, and in acknowledging it Helen suggested a vote of thanks to the Mayor, who in due course passed it on to Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin. And when everyone had spoken once, and quite a number of people twice, a tour of the stalls was begun.

"On what system do you go?" murmured Toby to Helen.

"I choose the thing the stall-holder likes best. It is much simpler," she whispered, and then with a radiant smile: "Worked by a sergeant-major, did you say? Those tiny forget-me-nots? But how wonderful, and what a good idea to have a

background of black satin. The flowers show so much more than they would on white."

At this moment the matron dashed forward with two painted wooden fans, representing the seasons (Winter in a Welsh hat, and Spring in a mob cap).

"These," she said, "are of special interest."

"Yes, indeed," murmured Helen a little faintly.

"They belonged to my grandmother-in-law who was Lord Kitchener's mother's bridesmaid."

Helen felt Toby's malicious smile full on her. She accepted the challenge.

"I don't think," she said deliberately, "that you have the right to part with them."

Forward they went from brown holland anti-macassars covered with honeysuckle to brush-and-comb bags with "kind regards" in purple silk.

Mrs. Baldwin's stall had a nightgown case with a design of butterflies alighting on fuchsias. ("Quite a change from the rose," she explained), and the Rector's wife had embroidered a white satin altar cloth with gold crosses and madonna lilies.

With tireless enthusiasm Helen admired and praised and bought and smiled till she was at last able to climb wearily over her purchases into her motor. "Buried under my treasures," she murmured to Mrs. Baldwin. "Thank you so much

for my delightful afternoon. I have enjoyed every moment of it, and please all come and see me soon. Do!" she added as she caught Toby's eye.

. . . . . .

"Well, was Mrs. Baldwin so very kind 'really' and Mr. Baldwin 'such a nice quiet man,' and the matron 'a perfect saint underneath her rather tiresome manner,' and the Mayor 'a perfectly delightful old character part,' and the bazaar the greatest success?"

They were sitting at dinner.

"You are spoiling all the fun I was going to have describing it."

"I was only guessing. True, I know the chains of the Mayor and the buttons of the matron, but I have never found his originality or her heart. As for the Baldwins, they are virgin soil for you to plant with all the flowers of your imagination."

"The Mayor made such a good speech."

"What did he say?"

"That we all knew what happened to new friends: they become old friends."

"Dear me, how epigrammatic! Did the matron add her Madame de Staël to the Mayor's Talleyrand?"

"Well, not exactly that, poor dear."

"And the Baldwins? Why, for once I am positively dragging information out of you."

"Mrs. Baldwin certainly is a little bright."

"And Mr. Baldwin?"

"Is rather grey, but I suspect full of point."

"Suspicious woman. Does this poor cloud live alone with his silver lining?"

"There is an overgrown, under-developed son at the awkward age and an enchanting twinkling nephew."

"And are they delightfully rich?"

"I suppose so. The library was still full of little pink begonias and Mrs. Baldwin wasn't wearing any pearls."

"How very restrained of her."

"By the way, Netta was there."

"Giving her Baedeker of the county, I suppose."

"I suppose so."

"Really when I think of my neighbours and my relations I come to the conclusion that providence is a sort of second-hand provision store. Now you are very lucky with only one father."

"Poor father!"

"I admit that he is very trying, but he is not in the least tiresome, and after all gambling is life in miniature. Think of getting from one pack of cards all of the emotions that can usually only

be got by breaking your heart or your neck. To be able to bring out at will a green baize table and at once know all the ecstasies and agonies of being in love or in danger, of hope, fear, doubt, triumph and despair."

"Yes, I know." Helen had her brooding look when suddenly her eyes filled with clouds. "Father is perfectly delightful and I love you to love him; but you don't know what life was like when we travelled about from one Pension to another, always liable to be turned out at any moment. And one couldn't even be agreeable without people thinking horrible things. It was so—"—she paused for a word—"so realistic."

"Things haven't a habit of being realistic where you are." An unaccustomed note of tenderness had crept into his voice. "You incurable romantic."

"My life has been a romance," she said, "and real. Think of being lifted out of all the squalor and put down here."

"Yes," he said with a touch of bitterness, "you do love this place."

"I love it." There was a crooning passion in her voice. "I love the bricks which look as if a sunset were reflected in them, and the square courtyard, and the iron gates, and the sweetbriar hedge, and the wide lawns with emerald footsteps

printed on the dew. I love the octagonal kitchen garden and the yews and the cedars and the hundreds of years of different sorts of furniture huddled together."

"And me, do you love me?" He longed in his pain to cry it out. Oh, those keys we never put into locks, the relevant vital things we sterilise with silence!

"Cyril," her eyes were still full of the house, "aren't you happy that it belongs to you? That it is really and truly yours? After all, I am only a visitor."

"You are the lover in possession of his mistress. I am the husband."

"But you love it too."

"Even husbands love sometimes."

"Do they?" Her smiling eyes were open doors. She held out her hand. He took it and kissed it very lightly.

"So I am told," he said drily.

"I wonder why he married me," she thought. "I suppose I amused him."

He tried to push away intimate memories of her loveliness. He thought what strange intermittent things human relationships were. "These twain shall be one flesh." Was it ever like that? he wondered.

"Shall we have coffee in the drawing room?"

she said. She always liked it in the dining room.

Jean opened the door. The two tall footmen looked like ghosts.

"Do you know, Cyril, I sometimes feel that Jean and James and William are the three Norns."

"How very disconcerting."

"They give me a feeling of fate, as if they made boundaries to my life."

"James and William are mountain ranges, I suppose. What is Jean?"

"Jean is the all-seeing eye of Providence."

They went into the long low library with its books gleaming gold and brown like the petals of chrysanthemums. The windows were open on to the terrace, and beyond the grey stone the lawn, drenched in dew, looked like a powdered head. Very dominant was the huge spreading cedar. Sculpted in shadow, it threw black feelers out into the distance where the white rose-garden gleamed phosphorescent, while the whole air was filled with the warring intermingling smells of sweetbriar and night-scented stocks.

Helen stepped out. Doubts and longings vanished, as she stretched out her arms into the beauty of the night.

"You will catch a cold, dear," Cyril called to

her, and turning round she walked back into her life.

The room seemed very gold and yellow after the grey and silver night.

Cyril had lit a crackling wood fire. "It warms my eyes," he said. "I am getting so chilly in my old age."

She sat down on the sofa beside him.

"Put your arm round me, darling. I want to be petted."

He put it round her rather stiffly. She shut her eyes, leaning her cheek against him.

"Do you remember falling in love with me?"

"Yes."

"Was I nice?"

"Very nice."

"Like what?"

"Like you are now."

"Cyril, do please make love to me."

"I am not much of a hand at it, am I?"

"No, dearest. Just tell me that you love me."

"Does it need saying?"

"Everything needs saying hundreds and hundreds of times."

He looked at her with narrow unsmiling eyes. "I love you," he said, and getting up to look for a book, he lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER II

"In the green gleam of dewy tasselled trees."

HELEN was walking down a grass path through the beech wood. The moss was as springy as a diving board—long stretches of green and gold pincushion. The air was so still that the leaves seemed cut out and stuck on to the sky.

Cantering towards her in coquettish indolence she saw a huge golden chestnut, gleaming like satin or a musical instrument. In a moment Toby was beside her.

"How delightfully brown you all look," Helen wanted to say, looking at his clothes and at his hair, but instead she said: "How nice! Were you coming to call on me?"

She knew he wasn't.

"No," he said, "when we call it is going to be a magnificent occasion. We shall all put on our best clothes and Uncle Henry will be persuaded to wear a grey bowler hat."

"And you will stay behind."

"Certainly not."

"And come another time peacefully."

"That would be quite delightful."

"To-day, in fact."

"May I?"

His tone was very deferential, but his eyes were piercing and enquiring. They seemed to be walking about among her locked thoughts as if they knew the way.

"Do." Some of the enthusiasm had gone out of her voice.

They walked side by side, Toby leading Cæsar.

"How glad you must be that the bazaar is over," Helen said.

"The preparations were awful and the aftermath has been worse. The clergyman's wife's altar cloth was sold by mistake for the price of the brush-and-comb bag."

"How dreadful! Couldn't I send them a cheque saying that it had seemed to me ridiculously cheap?"

"You might do that."

"Poor Mr. Baldwin, what a horrible time he is having."

"Not really. Other people's activities are to him just like the buzzing of bluebottles on a ceiling."

"Oh, to be really detached! Isn't that the right opera-glass through which to look at life?"

"Perhaps, if it doesn't prevent you from living your life as well as looking at it."

"It is all so complicated," she said, "the unfastidiousness of living your life in the sense in which people use that phrase, and the incompleteness of not doing so."

"You live yours."

"Do you think so?" She seemed surprised.

"Think of the richness you give everything, the fullness, the relevance. From the bazaar to——"

"To?"

"I cannot tell the ultimate pinnacle," he laughed, "but I feel that in your life are all the kingdoms of the world."

"But they have to be rejected, don't they?"

"Visited and found wanting."

She liked the feeling of hard subtlety that his mind gave her.

"And you," she said, "are you touring the kingdoms?"

"No," he answered. "I am sitting by the roadside waiting to begin my journey."

"And then?"

"Then if you have—and I pray God you may —become my friend, I shall disappoint you bitterly by living the life of a man of action."

"Why shall I be disappointed?"

"Because you like a lot of crudeness in reserve, but none in the front line."

"What sort of a man of action will you be? Will you empire-build or explore or become a financial Monte Cristo or discover the North Pole or a new sort of orchid? Please let it be an orchid."

"You shall have your orchid—Helen Mirabunda."

"On Mount Everest," she said dreamily, "there were fields of creamy roses and black clematis and valleys of pink lilies. In the Caucasus there are blue poppies—mekanopsis. Yes," she added, smiling at him, "do become a man of action."

He smiled back, dedicating to her untold exploits in quest of the irrelevant. And then suddenly she caught hold of his arm.

"Look," she said, "you can see the house. The walls are made of sunsets."

"It is very fine." He disliked and distrusted ecstasy. She was chilled.

"Are you living with your uncle and aunt?" she asked, emphasising by her tone the descent from Everest to the Baldwins.

"I have been, but now they have lent me a little cottage in the woods where I am going to work all the summer."

"Indeed." She deliberately did not ask what at.

"Some day perhaps,"—there was a lurking entreaty in his voice, "you will come there. There are," he racked his brain for their name, "hollyhocks in the garden. Black ones and red ones and lemon-coloured ones."

She forgave him.

"Tell me," Toby said, "how did your home, the house you love, come to be called Helen's Court?"

"Oh," she laughed, "it was called after Helen of Troy in about 1500. The then Lord Horsham was an eccentric scholar with a passionate love of Greece. He called the house Helen's Court and then went in search of a wife called Helen. He found her in the north of Italy. She was a peasant with hair like corn and eyes like cornflowers. They called their sons Paris and Menelaus. Menelaus was an irresistible rotter, and Paris a model husband. I don't know which were avenged, the Greeks or the Trojans."

"Surely the Greeks."

Helen smiled.

"There have been dozens of Helens since, but no Lord Horsham ever married one again till Cyril married me. And I was found in Italy—in a Pension."

"Learning Italian?"

"That too."

Toby didn't ask what else she had learnt. He never asked questions when he really wanted to know something. Confidences do not arise in response to curiosity, nor are they given as a reward for discretion. They come out in atmospheres heightened and heated by personal stirrings as flowers come out in a hothouse. And so our secrets are not given into the sacred keeping of locked safes, but are thrown recklessly into the swirling current of the moment.

Everyone always told things to Toby. He was so personal and so indifferent, forcing his profound general curiosity into sheaths of interest in the individual. No one had raped so many secrets, no one had kept his own reserve more inviolate. The most he ever gave was his low amused laugh or a specially dedicated sleepy smile out of the corner of his eyes.

They were walking down the drive in silence. Helen was thinking of those days in Italy, of Cyril's reverent, chivalrous adoration given to the girl who had always been treated as the valuable accessory of a disreputable old man—something which made it easier for him to borrow. Easier? She shivered. As easy as it had been impossible for her to pay.

Toby was thinking: "I wonder why she has never been in love?"

They reached the house. The inky yews guarded the rosy brick.

She walked through the inner courtyard with its pots of peach out through the library on to the lawn.

"Cyril!" she called, seeing his grey figure. "I have brought Mr. Ross to tea."

They settled down.

"Has poor Mr. Ross been shown the blue poppy?"

"No."

"My wife, to do her justice, is more of a gardener than a botanist. As a rule we have a riotous blaze of humble flowers in preference to invisible treasures with unrememberable names, but I fear that this wretched blue poppy may prove the thin edge of the wedge."

"It is a lovely poppy."

"An insidious flower. When you get to know Helen better you will find out that though she is in many ways a very remarkable woman she has an almost mystic passion for the irrelevant. All of her gifts and energy are thrown into an absolutely unproductive whirl of altruism and curiosity."

Helen laughed. "I am an admirable wife," she

said. "When I am here I become the mental Siamese Twin of the clergyman, who is, by the way, a most delightful man. When I am in London I give parties, so dull that I can hear myself laugh at them. I remember all of Cyril's aunts' birthdays for him. Not only do I have his relations to stay, but I entertain them so well that he never sees them at all. I— What else do I do for you, Cyril?"

"You delight my old age and you love my house."

"He is always like that," Helen explained to Toby. "He never says anything nice to me."

"Lord Horsham doesn't want to descend to the level of your other friends."

Cyril looked up and caught Toby's exploring look.

"That young man knows what he's talking about—or rather what he is not talking about—and so few people know that," Cyril reflected. He was faintly annoyed because he thought 'young man' a definite unindividualised category of life—a charted sea where no pilot was required, used only by small boats for short excursions; whereas here was Toby breaking all the rules by behaving like a ship on an ocean.

"You are thinking of the Mayor and the matron," Helen laughed.

But Toby was thinking of Cyril. The explorer was fascinated. He had made a double discovery —Cyril's passion for his wife, and her ignorance of it.

"We are all like the Mayor," Toby said lightly. "You spin our heads like tops and, being too giddy to see, we believe."

"The new religion." Cyril's voice was so dry that you felt that it was some sort of snuff which would make you sneeze. "Thank you, Mr. Ross. I will write a pamphlet entitled 'Sight as an obstacle to belief.' "

Helen puckered her brow. "But, compelled as I am by my sex to be strictly personal, what do I make you believe in?"

"Our own charm."

Cyril began to feel appreciative. After all, when you meet intelligence it is more convenient to enjoy it.

Toby felt a slight strain. It is so tiring to talk lightly about one thing when you are thinking deeply about something else. Also he had the feeling that Helen was the net over which he and Cyril were playing on an unmarked court, a game without rules. It was as if the conversation were scattering his ideas when he most wanted them concentrated.

After tea Helen showed him her garden. She

seemed suddenly to be more tightly strung, to be dominated by a force and detachment of passion, so that each look she gave to her flowers was the unspoken word of a deep communion between them.

It was, he supposed, a form of maternity. He asked her the names of several very well-known flowers. She didn't seem shocked by his ignorance because to her, loving them as she did, their names only mattered as a chanting accompaniment to their beauty.

"How impassioned you are," he said.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Everything consumes you. When you are still and severe your stillness and your severity are eating you up."

She smiled. "I am passivity itself," she said. "I lead the tidiest of lives and for months together I am here alone with Cyril perfectly happy gardening."

"You create your garden with passion. It gives you a child for every season. Besides," he smiled at her, "peace is not a form of inaction. It is a quality of the soul. Some people are born with it, but if it ever comes to you it will be in the form of a conquest and an abdication."

A certain dryness came into her voice. "What a lot you know, Mr. Ross."

"That is because I see so few people," he countered.

They had reached the house.

"Goodbye, Lady Horsham. It was delightful of you to let me come, and I did so enjoy meeting Lord Horsham."

"There is no one like Cyril," she answered.

He realised that she meant that her husband was different from rather than superior to any one else.

"You won't forget that you have promised to come and see my hollyhocks."

"I shan't forget," she said.

As he rode off he turned back and saw her shading her eyes with her hand, the drooping eagerness of her figure outlined against the red bricks she loved.

CHAPTER III

CYRIL had undoubtedly been very badly brought up. His father had died when he was ten and his mother had, as she often explained to her friends, "dedicated her life to him." The word described the whole of their relationship. Her sloppy enthusiasm, her self-indulgent sacrifice, her muddled ecstasy, helped to harden and acidulate his profound fastidiousness. Emotion was to her what drink is to a drunkard; her religion was a drug which deadened thought and provided her with unlimited "consolation." She had always tried, she said, to influence Cyril, and he would admit, with a dry contempt for his own weakness, that she had succeeded. It was to her that he owed his ultimate scepticism which was so essentially not, as many people imagined, an attitude or a pose, but a vital part of the fabric of his thought; and it was she who was responsible for his almost passionate inability to treat feelings simply and unselfconsciously even when he was compelled by his reason—the only form

of compulsion he recognised—to believe in their existence. The whole of their times together, as he remembered them, had been one long series of scenes dramatically set by her and defiantly rejected by him. With that sure instinct for hurting with which we seem endowed from birth, he had known even as a tiny boy how to cause the maximum of irritation, defrauding her with calm amusement alike of quarrels and reconciliations.

He remembered how she had once suggested to him that they should pray together among the rhododendrons. The whole wide world with all of its beauties, she had explained, was God's church. He had felt a surging rage at being dragged into her stage setting of the universe, but he had answered quite politely that he didn't believe in God and that therefore from a religious point of view the rhododendrons and the village church were all the same to him, and both, by the way, very beautiful.

"I suppose that you think you are being clever," she had hurled at him, and he had smiled, with regained good humour and accentuated contempt, at her irrelevance.

Best of all she would have liked him very passionate and very sorry. His courteous inaccessibility drove her to desperation. One day she heard him apologising to the gardener's boy.

"I didn't know you ever said you were sorry."

"I don't think I ever do unless I am sorry," he answered quietly.

He always went to church on Sundays. She would have liked him to refuse so that she could have forced him to go. She felt vaguely that his docility was a form of spite, a means of defrauding her of the discipline she wanted to exercise and of cutting her off from the arguments she had been prepared to bring forward.

"I thought you didn't believe in God," she taunted him one Sunday.

"I believe in good manners," he said, taking her wrap and her prayer book.

She didn't know if he were being civil to God or to her, but she felt too discouraged to ask.

As he looked at his mother, beautiful—she was very beautiful—and kind—she was genuinely kind—Cyril longed to be inspired to a flicker of tenderness, to feel some of the forbearance of understanding. But he couldn't, and as he grew older and more set concessions of the spirit became increasingly difficult to him. His own sense of duty amused him. To be a puppet with strings pulled by some invisible code was in a way less ridiculous than to pirouette about at your own initiative. The shadow cast by tradition over our lives is after all bigger than anything we can

create ourselves. Cyril's philosophy was one of pilgrimages without shrines, service without love, sacrifice without faith. He despised rewards with the easy contempt of someone who has never wanted them.

As his mother began to see less of him, he became the toy of the fertile falsity of her imagination. "My own boy," she would say with the tremolo that had played such an important part in her life, while she showed her friends the flowers and jewels he sent her with a satisfaction which showed a complete indifference to the lack of connection between his gifts and his feelings.

"He will have to marry," she would explain. "I don't know how I shall bear it," and she would look forward with unconscious pleasure to a grief which, properly manipulated, could hardly fail to be a source of unlimited joy in the guise of a grievance. But he didn't marry. It was part, she supposed, of the contrariness which in old days had made him go to church. And if he had no son, everything would go to a tiresome cousin with an odious mother. She talked to him about the sacred trust of inheritance, about nice girls, about the laughter of children. Her own married life had been one long blessing, she explained, describing her husband like a character in the nursery-maid's serial. Cyril remembered his father as an

arrogant, domineering figure whose conversation alternated between frenzied irritation and murderous irony. Why was the past always the foreordained victim of falsehood and sentimentalism?

"When you were born," his mother continued, "your father said to me: 'Evelina, this is the most beautiful moment of my life.' "

Lady Horsham was always convinced that the other person had said to her what she had said to them. Perhaps unconsciously it was the basis of her charity. When she described people they acquired a standardised high-church aroma which made it impossible for anyone who hadn't heard the name to know whom she was talking about.

When Cyril told her quite firmly that he was not intending to marry, she decided that he was enmeshed in the toils of some unscrupulous woman, but after watching with the utmost concentration for some symptom of this mythical figure she finally settled down to the belief that "Cyril was not quite like other people."

This formula opened up very satisfactory vistas. One week her "dear boy" was a recluse, and the next week "an eccentric," and in either character he talked most beautifully, though perhaps a certain similarity in his sentiments stamped

them for connoisseurs with the trade mark of Lady Horsham's conversation.

When he had reached the age of forty, his mother always spoke of him as a born celibate. "Even as a little boy," she added, "there was something so mediæval about him. There is a fine beauty, don't you think, about the only woman in your life having been your mother?" It was, of course, at this moment that he became engaged to be married. Lady Horsham was furious. What sort of a girl could it be, anyway, who would allow herself to be picked up in a Pension?

Cyril reminded her of the very odd women who had been picked up in ball rooms or even vicarages; but then, as if his love for Helen had already loosened other unsuspected feelings in him, he gave up his usual methods of warfare and said: "Mother, you must help Helen choose her trousseau. She is very poor."

Lady Horsham capitulated at once. "Of course, dearest, I shall love to help her."

It was, had she but known it, the greatest tribute that had ever been paid to Helen, this sudden appeal of son to mother—the first in forty years.

The passionate hours which her future mother-in-law spent fingering lingerie with trembling

hands, the untiring concentration which she gave to furs and jewels and dresses, touched and surprised Helen. How was she to know that the laces and ribbons and sables were in no way connected with her, but simply tokens and pledges from mother to son—the first she had ever been allowed to give.

"Your mother *is* sweet to me!"

"Is she?"

Cyril was amused. He supposed that his mother enjoyed the fuss, for with all his insight and his penetration he lacked the imaginative sympathy that would have revealed to him the hungry zest with which she was seizing the first opportunity that he had ever allowed her of pleasing him.

"Don't you think," Helen had once said to him, "that you are a little bit unaware of the pathos of the ridiculous, of the little poignant things that lie hidden behind grotesque masks?"

"Perhaps I am," he had admitted. "Little poignant things are not exactly in my line."

"But you would hate to be convicted of judging by appearances," she had retorted, knowing from long experience that he could only be approached by intellectual avenues.

"Helen," he had smiled, "you really are an intelligent woman. I delight in you."

But she had felt vaguely dissatisfied, as if somehow or other the pathetic had been let down by her.

Lady Horsham was genuinely fond of Helen. "Such a find" she would say of her as if she were a marvellous bargain picked up by her mother-in-law. "I always wanted him to marry an unspoilt country girl."

After this description, people were surprised when they saw Helen, Helen with her poise, her graciousness, her fine fastidious certainties, and that faint flavouring of irony, which played like a light over her charm.

"An unspoilt country girl." Helen, who had threaded her way without a single spiritual commitment through that maze of tenth-rate Pensions, who had lost neither smiles nor tears, when they could so easily have hardened into laughs and sobs. Helen with her light, sure touch, erect and free, so unentangled in life, that she never seemed to get caught in the machinery of existence, to be battered or tarnished or pushed forward or pulled back.

At twenty-two, after four years of marriage, she was just what she had been at sixteen—uncommitted.

"How it must simplify things, to be like your mother," she said one day to Cyril. "Until you are presented you are an unspoilt, country girl

and if she likes you and yet you don't hold yourself well, you are a child of nature."

The morning after Toby's visit, a letter arrived from Lady Horsham, saying that she would like to come down to Helen's Court for a few days to be "alone with her dear ones."

This was always a form of visit dreaded by the "dear ones," but as it was also unavoidable, they began to do their duty to their neighbours and the whole countryside was mobilised to save Cyril from his mother. After a week of lavish entertaining during which each meal was an exact replica of its predecessor, all the protagonists were completely exhausted, but as the culminating point of fatigue and irritation had nevertheless been reached in an evening *à trois* during which Lady Horsham had attempted to have a heart to heart talk with her son on the subject of missionaries, Helen looked desperately round for someone to relieve her garrison.

"Why not your young friend Ross?" Cyril asked.

"Oh, do you think so?" Helen was doubtful.

"Well, you didn't ask him when the Baldwins came."

"No."

"Besides, didn't you tell me that he was going to become a man of action? Isn't the first duty

of a man of action to be interested in bad climates, and won't that bring him very near the missionaries?"

"Very well, I'll ask him."

Helen thought that the evening would be unbearable. But Cyril was like that. With the lightest touch in the world, he was more insistent than anyone she had ever met. And with his irony playing over his suggestions all the time, they were nevertheless, harder and firmer than the appeals and demands of other people.

When the evening came Helen realised that she didn't really care what happened. She was going to see Toby again and nothing else mattered. At five, she could not believe that it was not six, at six she could not believe that it was not seven. At a quarter past seven, she began to dress. She seemed to have stayed in her bath a much shorter time than usual. She wished it took her longer to do her hair. In vain, she tried to dawdle, but the tempo of her movements was out of her control—an involuntary presto obeying the beats of her heart.

She was ready much too early. Her dress was a pale apricot, as if a lamp had shed a rosy light all over her. There was a slumbering brilliance in her eyes, and her lips were smiling intimately at her thoughts.

She went down into the library—while every sound she heard was in turn a hope and a disappointment—rearranging here a flower and there a book, making everywhere imperceptible changes, her lightest touch vibrant and fluttering like her heart.

Gradually the haze of her excitement cleared and crystallised into one all-pervading, definite wish: that Toby should arrive before Cyril came down, so that when he entered the room she should be able to give him the brightness of her eyes undimmed. For are not our great gifts glances? Shy budding smiles, faint puckered brows, the drooping corner of a mouth, fleeting shadows of pain or sympathy, swift flashes of understanding—all the latch-keys of the soul.

"How early you are." Cyril's tone was bantering.

She thought that any explanation would be an admission of the need of one, so after a pause which seemed to her wide and deep and absurdly committing, she murmured:

"Am I?"

"We ought to divide our neighbours according to the clothes you wear for them," Cyril went on, "black jet fossils, white crêpe de Chine bishops, rose velvet friends, cloth of silver newcomers, black lace clergymen, pink georgette

intimates, and apricot folds for susceptible young men."

Helen felt as if the bloom had been taken off her dress, but she was spared an answer by the entrance of Lady Horsham whose immense amethyst and diamond cross seemed more of a companion than an ornament.

"You look a picture," she murmured to her daughter-in-law who wondered, as she never stopped wondering, how the machinery of her mother-in-law's mental processes never by any chance went out of order, but always produced an automatic reaction of commonplaceness alike to the simplest and the most complicated incidents of life.

"There is a young man," explained Cyril, "who is not yet in love with my wife. Or is he, Helen?"

"Mr. Ross."

Toby walked in with an ease and carelessness which nevertheless had an edge of courtesy, the faintest flavouring of deference, as if he were laying his indifference as an offering at your feet.

Helen, quickly covering her expression, felt the very veiling of it to be an indiscretion. She blushed faintly, as if approaching footsteps had caught her moving from a keyhole, or hiding a letter in her bosom. Then, stepping off the stage

into that opera box of detachment which was always waiting for her, she watched Toby and Cyril eying one another with appreciative hostility, while Lady Horsham explained that she always had a warm corner in her heart for young people.

They walked in to dinner.

The conversation reached music—always a danger spot as Helen knew from bitter experience. Lady Horsham said that listening to music always took her out of herself. Cyril, glaring, explained how nearly it was allied to mathematics. Lady Horsham smiled at Toby, "Cyril always tries to pull our legs," she explained.

Toby, responding to an S. O. S. from Helen, murmured, "I know very little about music, only just enough to know that I don't know what I like."

Cyril was delighted and his mother bewildered.

"In Italy—" he said.

"Don't, dear," Lady Horsham was quiet and firm and a little pained, "poor Helen doesn't like talking about Italy."

"Why not?"

"It has unhappy memories for her."

"Helen, is it true that one rude word from a commercial traveller has spoilt Michelangelo for you?"

"Not quite," she smiled.

Toby thought her very lovely at that moment, sending a glance at her husband, half of appeal and half of reassurance which told him how little she had minded the commercial traveller, how passionately she loved Michelangelo, how much she longed to talk about Italy, but how important it was that he should not hurt his mother's feelings.

"I often wonder," Lady Horsham continued, "how people manage to paint on ceilings. I always think it must be most awkward. But then, looking at them is very difficult too," she added, as if to indicate that the painter had after all given as good as he had got.

Helen tried to drag the conversation away from any form of art, a topic fatally attractive to her mother-in-law, but Lady Horsham was already continuing rather plaintively,

"Don't you like beautiful pictures best, Mr. Ross? I always do."

She was, Toby said, very brave to admit it.

"I know I am old-fashioned, but in my youth, people didn't aim at ugliness as they do now."

"Their accidental achievements were positively miraculous then," Cyril broke in and Helen, realising that too many people had got their teeth into the subject for it to be dropped, tried to drag it out of the clutches of her mother-in-law.

"Vitality always precedes beauty, don't you think?" she said. "There is quite a long time between conception and birth."

"Helen dear," Lady Horsham was blushing.

"Whereas reproduction is always death and never resurrection. Look at the most perfect copy. It is a lifeless thing, a shell—empty of personality and soul. What you want is the spirit of life. So we must look tenderly at our brave, stumbling pioneers, remembering when they try to shock us by being a little more original and a little more ugly than it is necessary to be, that it is really only the divine overflow of youth."

Cyril smiled at her vehemence, " 'Dear Mr. Wyndham Lewis,' you would say, 'have you really walked ten steps to-day?' 'What is your toy called? *Blast?* Darling baby. What a lovely magenta cover.' "

Lady Horsham was restive. She didn't know what they were talking about. "Art," she said sententiously, "was a very different thing when it had religion behind it."

"You talk as if religion were a safe financial backer."

"You know perfectly well what I mean, Cyril. Cathedrals, madonnas, the beautiful inspirations of faith. Whereas now, I see nothing but egotism seeking expression in self-advertisement."

"Yes," said Helen who always caught at truths in what people were saying which they had not meant to put there, "that is the real point. The difficulty of losing yourself and keeping yourself. Both are so essential." Lady Horsham felt that once again the conversation had got out of hand.

"I am sure that Mr. Ross is with me," she said and Toby answered mischievously, but to her complete satisfaction.

"I hope always to have you on my side, Lady Horsham."

"Mother adores young men," Cyril explained flippantly.

Lady Horsham sighed. "Youth," she said sentimentally. "There is nothing like it."

"All youth?" Cyril interposed, but she took no notice.

"A lamb, the bud of a primrose, a child, little thoughtless things waiting for the sun to bring them out."

Helen looked nervously at Cyril.

"Adventurous boys with laughing eyes, shy blushing girls ripened by love."

Toby wished she wouldn't. Sweet sentiments, bad books, absurd old women, they were all so true to life, taking images out of one's heart where they had been warm and soft and glowing —perhaps even a little blurred—and turning them

into the Christmas supplement of a girls' magazine. And yet, weren't Lady Horsham's laughing, adventurous boys more a part of the fabric of life than Cyril's fastidious rejections and weary acceptances? What Helen had said was true, the fumbling spirit meant so much more than sterile finish.

He looked at Lady Horsham, swaying in her absurd ecstasy, almost reverently. She made him remember something his mother had once said: "Caricatures are purged by laughter. It is only when they catch a serious part of you and spoil something, that they are dangerous." That, of course, was it. Cyril had never been able to laugh light-heartedly at his mother and that was why she had always spoilt things for him.

"Coffee is in the drawing room, mother, you can take your knight-errants with you."

There was no good humour, Toby reflected, in Cyril's attitude towards his mother, but seeing Helen give her husband a little, light caressing touch as she passed him, and a loving, grateful glance, he realised that this must have been one of Cyril's more patient evenings.

Left alone, the men discussed the Einstein theory and, later, professions. Toby's enthusiasm bubbled up when he talked about the world, but he felt it to be an irrelevant, gurgling thing beside

the white flame of Cyril's intellect which so pierced through his conversation that when he talked, his words seemed like alabaster through which a light was shining. Doubts did not belong to Toby's philosophy. He was too young to know that they are the refining processes of the soul, burning our thoughts into shape, the fires that test and harden, consuming everything but the very marrow of the spirit. He was glad to be born free of traditions and obligations—glad that his uncle's fortune was made and not inherited. By some unanalysed process, it seemed to absolve him of the crimes of civilization. And yet—money too is an inheritance.

To-night, for the first time, he felt that his crisp ruthlessness was being tested—a test all the more searching for not being a challenge. Cyril's mind, with its lights and shadows, with its curt refusal to deal in substitutes, with its fine leanness which gave to his every thought the quality of an athlete in training, made Toby feel crude and violent with a forcefulness which was not strength. And all the time, Cyril was watching Toby, half laughing, half envious, lenient and acid—smiling a little bitterly at his light confidence, brilliant and brittle, like air waiting to fill a balloon before sailing away into blue horizons of distant hopes. And, being honest, he thought,

"Faith and inexperience, to get them back again, would we not sell achievements, knowledge, experience a thousand times? A hope is not quite a hope until it is forlorn. When we are young, each time we stumble, every false step we make nevertheless takes us forward. We are still climbing the citadel of the future. Later, every triumphant stride leaves us in the same place. Why? Because getting things is nothing. It is wanting them that matters."

With a wry smile, he got up.

"Am I regretting my youth? My cynical, intolerant, dispassionate youth?" he said to himself, and to Toby, "Shall we join the ladies?"

CHAPTER IV

LADY Horsham had left, Cyril was in London, Helen was going to dine with Toby.

All day long she had done the most tiresome things she could think of and through her every act glowed her happiness until the burning fire within it turned each duty into a lamp, lighting her on her way.

Netta Carstairs came to tea. Her bright, prying eyes, as always, gave you the feeling that they looked at the world through a keyhole, just as her information seemed to have come from eavesdropping or peeping at people when they were unaware of it.

"Clothes are as much a part of us as our bodies," Helen had said to her once. "Reticences are as revealing as avowals."

But Netta didn't agree. Her psychological method was one of stripping, brushing aside that faint unanalysed fragrance which is the aura of personality. "Washing the grape," Helen called it.

"Poor Netta's mouth is so full of pepper and

salt," she said another time, "that subtle flavours have no chance of being recognized."

Mrs. Carstairs believed in results. Charm to her was a huge plant for turning out successes. She consequently respected Helen immensely, not so much for her qualities—or, above all, her quality—as for her triumphs.

"Helen really is delightful," she would say, as if delightfulness were an extravagance which only the rich could afford. And in an odd way, she really loved her, with a love which was born—though she didn't know it—when Helen with two dresses, no money and the sort of experience Mrs. Carstairs devoutly hoped would be of no use to her—had first arrived at Helen's Court, straight from Italy, and had thrown one frightened, appealing glance at Netta, who, like every other devotee of success, had succumbed at once to the forlorn. "I showed her the ropes," she would explain proudly and from that day onwards, Helen could not call her soul—or what was worse, her plans—her own.

On the afternoon of Toby's dinner, Mrs. Carstairs was more than usually exasperating. All of her sentences began "I thought you ought to know," "I felt bound to tell you," or "I defended you." Helen's past appeared as one long procession of trodden on toes, unacknowledged bows,

overlooked acquaintances, unrecognized faces, forgotten names, belated condolences, premature congratulations—in fact, omitted civilities of all sorts.

"Really, Netta, if life is to be one long obstacle race, I am glad that at least some of the dangers are invisible."

"Well, I always say one can't be too careful."

Mrs. Carstairs was not exaggerating, Helen reflected, she did always say it.

"By the way, I hear that Ross boy's path is strewn with broken hearts and broken hearths."

"Indeed?"

"Married and unmarried, he gets them all. And gets rid of them," added Mrs. Carstairs with admiration. "I am told he jilted the most charming girl this winter." Netta, who was naturally acquisitive, was apt to be penny-wise and pound-foolish in her achievements, so she always respected people who threw things away.

"It is much better and braver to break it off, don't you think?" Helen murmured.

"Better than what? Better than marrying certainly, but worse than not getting engaged."

"Perhaps he wasn't really engaged," Helen suggested feebly.

"Probably not," Netta agreed grimly. "Much too cautious to commit himself I should say. On

the make, that's what he is, and too obviously so, don't you think?"

"No."

Helen regretted having answered so shortly. Curtness on her part was sufficiently unusual to turn on the full glare of Netta's curiosity and indeed Mrs. Carstairs had already fixed a penetrating glance on the face of her companion.

"Well, my dear, one can't be too careful," she repeated, relishing the sinister significance which she could now press into a generalization that had seemed only too innocent a few moments before, and giving her hostess a peck on each cheek, she left with the delightful sense of having unearthed a secret.

"Fool that I am," said Helen to herself. "I ought to have brought up the subject of Toby myself instead of letting her do it. Then I should have been on my guard. Surely at my time of life, I ought to know how to insure against shocks."

She felt worried and restless, as if Mrs. Carstairs had left sooty finger-marks on something very precious.

"The smudges won't come out," she thought desolately, and the serene, golden evening seemed an ironical comment on an inhabited world.

. . . . . .

Two hours later, Helen, wrapped like a mummy in a white lace shawl, was tapping at the door of Toby's cottage. He opened it himself and looked at the tip of her head. It was a trick he had, only to find your eyes slowly so that when he reached them it was the consummation of your meeting and not a careless, accidental contact of glances. Gradually, his look gathered up the whole of her.

"Come in," he said, setting an official seal of words on the welcome his eyes had given her.

She walked in.

In the middle of the room was a table with a red plush tablecloth, and a lace "centerpiece" on which stood three white china cupids holding a potted fern. The sofa with its visibly broken spring, was covered with mustard and water-can green wool. The armchair, newly upholstered in cinnamon velvet was protected by an antimacassar embroidered with looking-glass. A stool and a "what-not" of buttoned, sky-blue satin, and an upright piano, the keys reverently covered by red baize embroidered with honeysuckle, completed the furniture, while the walls were decorated with pictures of the Prince Consort, deer stalking in a top hat, a lady swearing fidelity to a cavalier lover (passion is always royalist), and a text "Prepare to meet thy God," embroidered in red silk with a border of yellow.

"Oh!" said Helen, her eyes alight.

"Some day I shall change it," Toby explained negligently.

But she realized that he wouldn't, not because it meant so much to him—it meant a great deal to her—but because it meant so little. And for a moment she felt the same revulsion against him that she had felt when he didn't love her red brick walls. It was as if every now and then she found a cold, empty room inside him.

"Cyril would hate it," she thought, "but he would understand it. It would be the same as loving it."

And seeing Toby impervious to the blue satin and the Prince Consort, she knew that he was not quite civilized.

"May I take off your cloak?" he asked. He never exactly made a request, he simply stated what he was going to do and sugar-coated it in deference.

Slowly he unwound her layers of lace with a quiet triumphant feeling that he was unwrapping her reserve. Never again, he felt, would she be cool and remote—cold, perhaps, and distant, but intentionally, not accidentally so, because she was touched, not because she was untouched. When cool becomes cold, the impersonal has stepped down to the personal.

"Let us go out till dinner is ready," he said and they walked into the little garden thick with flowers, moss roses and verbena, cabbage roses and nasturtiums, and all along the wall, a procession of hollyhocks, lemon and black-purple satin single ones and tight pink and white and crimson rosettes.

"It is a lovely garden," she said, but she knew he didn't know that it was a part of the antimacassars and the gallant cavalier swearing fidelity to his lady.

"Perhaps," she thought, "it is even a part of 'Prepare to meet thy God.' No, it can't be that. Anyone would be ready among the moss roses."

"What are you thinking about?" he was jealous of her wandering thoughts, thoughts that were, he suspected, discourteously impersonal.

"I was wishing it were 'Faith, hope and charity, but the greatest of these is charity.' "

He was bewildered.

"The text I mean."

He smiled, "Do you think it is a bad omen?"

"Oh—that wasn't what I meant," she felt discouraged.

They went in and ate delicious roast chicken and green peas and gooseberry tart with thick cream, while Helen, talking to Mary Ann and

Nimrod her husband, felt nearer the Prince Consort than ever.

And Toby, seeing her sitting there, her whiteness blurred and gleaming in the fading light, felt that after all she had escaped him, while Helen, her craving for him stilled by his presence, was released from his domination, at peace and happy, in harmony with the broken sofa and Mary Ann's footsteps and the dark tangle of flowers outside.

"You are so far away," he complained.

"I feel at home," she smiled, and she was further off than ever.

"Tell me about Italy," he said, hoping to break the spell.

"At Mantua," she murmured, "the lagoons are pewter and the town rises harsh and cold and very beautiful."

"I didn't mean that," he was petulant.

"Maps are anthologies for poets," she said.

He liked that—reluctantly. He wanted her to talk about herself.

"It was untidy and inconsequent and horrible," she explained, "and the sunshine and the loveliness made it worse. At least I used to think so. I wanted to come back and run a gambling house in Tooting. It seemed more appropriate. You see, I was young then. I thought that things spoilt one another."

"And don't they?"

"Real things aren't spoilt. Besides, they are often part of one another. Italian bad taste, for instance. It is triple essence of Italy. If you reject it, you have no right to love the Renaissance. It is exuberance, the exuberance we all so terribly lack."

"But you respond to so many things," he said.

"Yes," she admitted drily, "I am diffuse. It is not the same as being overflowing, you know."

"You have never been in love," he said.

"Don't you think so?" her tone was mocking.

"Am I impertinent?"

"Very impertinent and very young."

He was piqued. "Shall I tell you how I know?"

"Please do."

"Because you are so sure. Your calm warmth does not come from triumphs or defeat, it comes, as your quiet strength comes, from your personal immunity. All of your sensitive and intense power of feeling, all of your wide powerful vision is imaginative. You have never been submerged."

She was silent.

"I hope," his voice was low and passionate, "that you will never fall in love."

She was startled.

"Why?"

He had caught the very depths of her attention.

"It would weaken you," his voice was normal again. Quietly, almost as if he were speaking to himself, he said, "I hate weakness."

It sounded terrible to her, spoken like that, with the ordinariness of an everyday thing.

"She is hard as I am hard," he thought, and he respected her for it.

A lamp had been brought in. It bathed her in a pool of light. Her white dress was turned to glowing amber, there was a halo of brightness round her head. Only her eyes were hidden in shadows.

"I must be going," she said. He was to drive her home.

Slowly and carefully he wound her back into her lace. Before covering her hands he kissed them, and smiling full at her, "Thank you for coming," he said. His eyes held hers till he chose to break the spell. They seemed to draw power and resistance away from her, so that when he let them go, she felt tired and limp.

He lifted her into the dog-cart and her whiteness in the bright moonlight, gave her a ghost-like quality. The air was heavy with honeysuckle

and the whole countryside was the colour of steel. They drove in silence—while the sentence, "I wonder what she would do if I kissed her," knocked insistently at his mind. "She would be more freezing than the colour of the moonlight," he thought, "and as remote." He remembered how she had talked about Mantua. Should he do it roughly, for the pleasure of the physical effect of her, flushed and dishevelled? Or with quiet insistence to see the changing expressions of her face—blank surprise, followed by absolute disdain?

Very few people could ever have dared kiss her—that, he reflected, was the advantage of being an experimentalist, there was no passion to restrain. Perhaps if he had been more in love with her, he would not have kissed her against her will—"I probably should have, though," he admitted cynically.

In a flash, they seemed to have arrived. He lifted her down and unwrapped her. He felt no response to the gentle pressure of his hands.

The white light had taken the colours out of her, as she stood there, her hair and eyes shadows, the pale beauty of her outline silhouetted against the dark brick. He wound his arm round her and drew her towards him. With her hand, she pressed his face back.

"I want to kiss you," he said in a thick muffled voice.

"No," she crooned at him gently, as if she were talking to a child, "you mustn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because you don't love me."

He was dumb and irresolute with surprise. It was the last thing he had expected her to say and before he had had time to recover his wits, she had taken his face in both hands and kissed him gently and deliberately, first on one eye and then on the other.

"Good-night," she said to him, still in her lullaby voice, and walking back into the night, he felt that something momentous had happened which he didn't in the least understand.

CHAPTER V

HELEN was gardening in big chamois leather gloves and a sun-bonnet. All day long she had felt like a cork bobbing on some current of life—a sharp, swirling current—instead of being, as someone had once described her, a water-lily rooted in some calm, unfathomed depth of water.

"People always," she reflected drily, "assume that the absolute is contained in our reactions to them. To the passionate—if we don't care about them—we are prudes, to the indifferent—if we love them—we are bores. And so we go through life portrayed in extremes, responding inadequately to some law of supply and demand, with no inner wisdom to guide our distributions, giving always too much or too little, wounded or wounding, trying in vain to break a halo or to build a pedestal."

What is the good of evoking philosophy in words, trying to give your brain command over your spirit when the note of a bird, the smell

of a flower will disperse your thoughts and stir hidden senses you had tried to lull?

Helen, her serenity strangely lost, walked with deliberate, slow steps, talked in a low monotonous voice, sought and performed tiresome, unnecessary duties while all the time her heart sang like a kettle and the drowsy July day seemed tingling with urgent, hidden meanings. Even the burning silence of noon, making each living creature immovable with heat, seemed to her but a pause, a moment of hush in the turbulent drama of life.

All day long, she expected Toby. What he would say she didn't know, or what she would say to him, only she wanted suddenly to look up and see him coming towards her shading his eyes with his hand. Perhaps he would just say "Helen"—That would be best of all—there is no caress like your own Christian name. The "beloveds" and "darlings" and "blesseds" belong to everyone, they are the ordinary currency of love, blank cheques with changing signatures. But your name—your very own name—it is a clarion call and a whisper—proclaiming you to the world and giving you to those you love. Each time it is said to you it creates you, it anoints you.

She remembered that when Toby had first said "Helen" she had felt as if he had christened

her and all day long she had worn her name proudly, as if it were a halo with which he had crowned her.

Of course it didn't matter what he said. It was his voice she wanted to hear, its resonance sheathed like a sword in its low, soft quality. She wanted to feel his fingers on her wrists and the touch of his lips on her hands. She felt as if he had cast a spell over her so that she was walking about like a person half alive. Not until he came would she be herself again, only his presence could release her from her longing for him, so that when she was with him she was in a sense free of him, further away from him than she ever was when they were apart.

The day dragged slowly along, the minutes sprawling languidly in the hours. Helen, to propitiate the gods, put on an old print sunbonnet and worked during the boiling heat in a remote corner of the garden. But Providence smilingly rejected her hostages. At last, when she was beginning to give up all hope she saw a man's figure walking towards her, a dark silhouette against the light.

"Helen," a voice called and her soaring hopes fell to the ground with a thump.

"Christopher," she returned his wave.

"Helen," he said it again when he reached her,

and it rang full of love and finality as if to him the whole world were shut up in her name.

It hurt her. She felt as if he had stolen something, smudging her gleaming memories. "I ought to have locked them further away," she thought, and to him she said:

"What a delightful surprise, I didn't expect you till to-morrow."

"Cyril told me to come. He said it was silly to arrive with the party when I might have a nice quiet evening alone with you."

"When is he coming?"

"In time for dinner."

They were walking towards the house.

"Are you ill, my dear?"

"Of course not. Why?"

"You look feverish. Your eyes are so dark and brilliant!"

"Nonsense."

"Helen," he smiled at her, "do you know that I haven't seen you for five whole weeks?"

"Of course I know it."

"I don't think I shall ever go abroad again unless it is towards you. Having that sort of a holiday is like betting against yourself."

"Well, you are back now."

Try as she would, she couldn't keep a certain matter-of-factness out of her voice.

She saw that he was hurt. But he only said gently:

"Yes, back in body. I have been here so often in spirit—seeing your red bricks and the sunset flaming in the window-panes. And then you would walk towards me and I would suddenly look up and see you coming closer and closer, your hand shading your eyes. And you said—I don't know what you said. It didn't matter, of course—it was just your voice."

"Don't," she stopped him sharply. He was dragging his longings across hers. It was more than she could bear—and so silly. He had got it all wrong. It was Toby who was to have shaded his eyes. It was Toby whose voice mattered.

"My dear," he was alarmed. "I know you're ill, I can see it. I am going to take you straight in and you are going to lie down till dinner. Do you think you have a tiny touch of sunstroke?"

"Oh, no. I'm just tired. It has been hot, hasn't it?"

She put her hand through his arm to ward off his prying thoughts.

"Dear Christopher," she said. He took her hand and kissed it. A blur of tears filled her eyes. Again he had taken one of her memories

and crumpled it up. Surreptitiously she tried to wipe them away. He saw her.

"Helen," he said passionately, bending down to her.

She looked up smiling, "I am silly, aren't I?" she murmured, adding with perfect truth,

"Five weeks is a very long time."

. . . . . .

"Well, didn't I provide you with a delightful surprise?"

"Yes, indeed."

They were sitting at dinner.

"Christopher was wandering about as lost as——"

"A person who has just come home," Christopher explained. "Every story had reached a Henry Jamesian stage which it required a psychoanalyst to unwind. I tried to explain that the crudest, oldest bit of gossip—five or four or three weeks old—was new and intoxicating to me. But no one would believe it or repeat anything. Have you ever noticed, Helen, how you hear a thing a thousand times if you know it already, and no one will tell it to you once if you are really ignorant?"

"Yes."

She was forcibly holding down her attention.

"And several people said, 'Oh, I haven't seen

you for days,' and when I explained rather stiffly that I had been away for weeks, they retorted, 'You never told me,' reproachfully, as if I had plotted a *gaffe* for them."

"Self-esteem ought to prevent one from going away," Cyril asserted, "it is too discouraging to find that one's absence is as little noticed as one's presence."

"One ought not to complain," Christopher's grey eyes were twinkling, "I miss no one except Helen and my valet."

"Oh, my dear, what a compliment. You make me feel a *femme necessaire.*"

"No," he said seriously, "never that. Always superfluous—and inevitable."

"Do you think that you ought to make love to my wife in front of me?" Cyril grumbled; "you may convince her that your intentions are honourable—in fact that you are not an *'homme serieux.'*"

"Cyril is so practical," Helen explained.

"You remember how practical I used to be?" Christopher asked his host. "My life was one long series of pursuits, the passion of which I denied, and surrenders, the passion of which I invented. In fact I was as eager and cynical as one could wish. And then a terrible thing happened—I met Helen."

"And you discovered, *faute de mieux*, that love was not a matter of the senses?" Cyril wondered whether he was hurting them or only hurting himself.

"That it was not exclusively a matter of the senses."

"I refuse to be discussed as if I were not there," Helen was laughing, "I will leave you and you can join me when I have ceased to be a topic."

"I remember your falling in love with Helen," Cyril said. They were old friends.

"So do I." A note of dryness had crept into Christopher's voice.

"What cured you?"

"I am not cured."

"Oh——"

"The tongue licks where the tooth aches."

"One is never free, is one?" Cyril ruminated. "First the aching tooth, then the aching void, and finally, the false tooth, shiny and alien and removable."

There was a silence. Then Christopher said with an effort—because it is difficult to say a perfectly simple thing if you have been trying to say it for some time.

"Is there anything the matter with Helen?"

"The matter?"

"Is she ill, I mean."

"Why?"

"She seemed so strange this afternoon."

"I don't think so. But then, perhaps I shouldn't notice—you see, I am her husband."

There was a slight pause. Then Christopher said——

"May I say something? We are such very old friends."

"Is it as disagreeable as all that?" Cyril smiled.

"Not quite."

"Go ahead then."

"Well, it isn't that you don't notice enough. You don't show enough."

"It is an art, isn't it? Showing?" Cyril's smile hadn't moved, "unless, of course, it is a vocation, as in the case of my mother."

"Don't you hold Lady Horsham responsible for too many things?"

"Perhaps. Only I do admit that it is a joint responsibility. All influence has to find a victim, and at once it becomes a mixed affair, half murder and half suicide."

They were walking into Helen's boudoir. She looked up.

"What were you talking about?"

"Influencing people."

"Oh," she said, "it is so dangerous. Their acts and thoughts become your illegitimate children.

You can't get away from them and Heaven knows what they mayn't grow up into."

"Helen is an old hand," Cyril smiled at her, "she is always making free traders and philanthropists and gardeners and novelists and poets. She has even been known to make marriages."

"Very few. I don't like married men."

"Or married women?"

"Or women."

"Cynic."

"Oh, no. A romantic with everyone always able to disappoint."

"Let us go out in the garden," Christopher said.

"You two go, I am too old."

"Three years older than I am."

"But, as Helen would say, I am married."

"I accept my superiority."

"And I plead guilty," she laughed.

They walked out into the night, magnesium-lit it seemed, with hard white moonlight and hard black shadows. Even the half-tones were metallic, gun-metal and steel.

"How is your blue poppy?"

"Dead."

"For always?"

"Oh, no. I hope not." She stretched out her arms. "Do things die, ever?" she asked passion-

ately, "I don't mean ourselves. I am not talking about a next life. But here, do our memories die, the things we love, people, dogs, moments, the single ones that don't come again?"

He had never seen her like that—urgent, driven, hungering for reassurances.

"I don't think they die," he said gently, "but they become like old letters—the ink is brown, the paper is thin."

"Oh no," it was a cry of pain, "not like that."

"Unless, of course," he was thinking out loud, "there is a physical death to keep your vision bright. Then things stay as they were, invulnerable, locked, untampered with."

She was silent, pondering that quality of finality—the quality that preserves.

"But in this life" she persisted, "aren't there breaks that keep—that let us hold the brightness inviolate, untarnished?"

"No," he said, "because they are voluntary. You cannot break like that without a smash."

"Life is so complicated," she said, "so competitive, so invading. You can't keep anything free of it."

He longed to remind her how free of it she had been—freer than anyone because she was in the middle of it, enjoying it, responding to it and yet untouched by it.

"Helen"—Cyril's voice was calling her.

They stopped.

"I have brought you a wrap." He was coming towards them. "In this light," he said, "you look as if you were made of radium." Over his arm was her white lace shawl.

"I don't want it," she said sharply, and then pulling herself together, "thank you, darling, but it is so warm."

"Christopher thinks that no one looks after you," he said lightly, "I insist on proving that he is wrong."

She didn't resist any more, but as he wound her tighter and tighter, she thought, "we cannot be punished with whips, only with our joys turned against us."

She felt desolate and denuded—all of the little bits of happiness with which she had started the day had been stolen from her one by one.

"I didn't come to interrupt," Cyril apologised. "We were coming in anyway."

They walked across the lawn, grey with dew. The whole night smelt of limes.

Christopher wanted to prove his love in difficult, secret ways that she would never know of.

Cyril said to himself, "After all, one can't

show everything, only—" this a little wistfully—"I wish I knew how to show some of it."

Helen imagined the yellow lamp shedding its pool of amber. The Prince Consort and the piano were in darkness, Toby's face was in his hands, his hair shone with red gold lights, and each of his fingers was long and brown and strong——

Her boudoir was creamy, with large bowls of roses everywhere, and the lights filtering through pale apricot shades. She looked at her favourite Spanish rug, cream and black-blue and turquoise with one touch of emerald. Behind her chair was a vast bunch of flaming gladioli in a creamy Sung vase.

Suddenly, she could bear it no longer. Her day had been so empty—so full of crushed intangible things.

"I dined with Toby Ross last night," she said.

Oh, the joy of saying his name! How soon would she be able to use it again?

"Who is Toby Ross?"

"A nephew of the people who have bought Overton, the Baldwins—colossally rich they are. The young man is very intelligent and alive and on the make."

"Just what he should be in fact. What we ought to have been." Helen knew how pro-

foundly Christopher would have disliked to be anything but his own fastidious, aloof self.

"He is not a bit like that really," she murmured, "he is delightful, subtle, without compromises."

"How ridiculous," she thought "for me to be discussing Toby, describing him even. Only it is better to have him like that in the conversation than stampeding my thoughts all the time."

"Where did you dine?" Cyril was asking her.

"In the cottage they have lent him in the wood. It belongs to a retired gamekeeper called Nimrod."

"How very suitable."

"They will never know," she thought exultantly, "about the Prince Consort and the hollyhocks."

They wouldn't want to, of course, but *she* would never know that.

How could she believe that precious sacred things, oleographs, and china cupids, and broken sofas, would be to the world what they were to Toby, ugly temporary makeshifts, to be got rid of and changed when one had the time or the energy?

Cyril was yawning—"It is late," he said.

"Good-night, Helen," Christopher kissed her hand.

Wearily she walked up-stairs, wearily she undressed. Too tired to go to bed, she sat on the sofa combing her hair with the gold comb Cyril had once given her because he liked to see it gleaming through her hair.

"The Lorelei knew what she was about," he had said.

She felt head-achy and depressed.

"May I come in?"

"Come in."

Cyril stood in the doorway.

"You look lovely, lovely," he said.

There was a strange note of passion in his voice. The note he had always kept out of it, that she had always longed for. She hardly heard it.

He knelt by the sofa, burying his face in her hair. Suddenly he got up and lifting her in his arms, he laid her on the bed.

"I love you, Helen, I love you"—his breath came in quick, jerky stabs. "May I? I must—dearest——"

She lay acquiescent. And then with bitter self-reproach, she blamed her own ungenerous joylessness, while all the time she knew only too well that it was not herself that she was giving to him.

CHAPTER VI

"ENTERTAINING is one method of avoiding people," Cyril explained at breakfast. "It is very often the negation of hospitality. I am bored by an acquaintance, in order to get rid of her I ask her to lunch. In order not to sit next to her at lunch, I invite various other people. Two women to protect me and two men to satisfy her. And that is only the beginning of the snow-ball. By the time my subterfuges have reached a logical conclusion, I find myself with a house full of people in the country."

"Yes," Helen sighed, "we have four lists—duty, pleasure, habit and, as Cyril says, irresolution. Irresolution is by far the most productive."

"Helen, you old humbug, you know you love it."

"Well, I like mixing people and seeing them surprised and shocked by one another. And I like young people who take themselves seriously

and old people who take themselves lightly and very old people who remember things. And I enjoy good talkers and good game players and mimics and specialists and anyone with *joie de vivre.*"

"That seems fairly comprehensive."

"But I don't like people who know their place. Servants who never comment, duchesses who hardly sniff, women who mind where they go in to dinner. And I hate the intellectually pretentious who, talking about furniture, call panels '*panneaux*' and refer to 'that little bit in F sharp' because they don't know how to hum."

Cyril smiled. "You know Helen's immortal category? *'Femmes intelligentes pour hommes bêtes'.*"

"Well," Helen explained, "we have the most perfect instance coming this afternoon—Mrs. Blaine. She rides quite well and reads lots of reviews and remembers what some people say. So her sporting friends think her a blue stocking and her intellectual friends admire her physical prowess and—as if that weren't enough—she is also a perfect lady. Such a perfect lady! She never raises her voice, she never fidgets, she never contradicts, she never gets untidy. She is always decorative, really decorative—lovely lines of neck and shoulder and arm and instep. And she in-

variably sits by a lamp. That, to me, is her great redeeming point. Asking her to one's house is like ordering flowers. I am told that she has a heart of gold, but how am I ever to find out?"

"You might try getting very ill or running away."

"Yes," she agreed, "but there is something so unsatisfactory about life as a laboratory. There are so many experiments one can't make."

"That is chemically true too. Even science has its explosions."

"I used to want to *know*," Helen was talking as if they weren't there, "I trained my mind to be dispassionate and enquiring. Now that that is the last thing in the world I want, my brain goes on behaving as I taught it to do."

They were surprised at a sort of desperateness in her voice.

"Never mind, Helen," Cyril's tone was very light. "I promise that with you two and two will never make four."

She felt a little frightened, as if he had pursued her distant thoughts along the lonely road down which they were fleeing, and, violating the isolation which was to be her sanctuary, he had suddenly caught up with her and broken into the cold peace she thought that she had found.

"Do show me the garden before the others

come," Christopher begged. "By the way, who are the others?"

"Oh, the Austrian Ambassador and Lord William Cathcart and delightful Selina and Mathew and Virginia and beloved Lydia Hathaway and Cyril's old aunt, Lady Raeburn, and various other people. I don't want to think about them. It will be bad enough when they come."

"Then, let us go out."

The heat seemed to be rolling up with the hours. There was a burning stillness everywhere. Not a bird sang. Not a flower nodded.

Helen and Christopher left the garden where the blazing colours turned the day into a furnace.

"Sun flowers and red hot pokers and gladioli —it is too much," he had said, and they retreated to the beech wood, lying on the golden moss, looking up at the sky through patterns of leaves. And Helen wished that Christopher were not there. Wished it because his understanding was an edge on her unrest, wished it because with his intuition, her every word, her every silence became a betrayal.

"He loves me," she thought and with a stab. she realized that this long-known and long accepted fact had never been real to her until she had met Toby. "I won't think of Cyril," she thought, panic stricken at the vista her admission

opened and by this very banging of the door, admitted her husband to a new place in her consciousness.

"Sympathy is always an indiscretion, isn't it?"

She jumped. Was Christopher thought-reading, or did the significance of his words come from her own fears?

"In what way?" she was giving herself time.

"Well," he mused, "perhaps I should have said understanding. It is a sort of skeleton key, and one goes about like a thief, unlocking drawers and stealing secret thoughts and hopes and fears. The worst of it is that one doesn't even mean to. It is involuntary."

"Yes," she said in a low voice.

"Helen," his whimsical smiling eyes sought to reassure her, "you who never lock doors—if some day by accident I should find a little cabinet hidden somewhere, and inevitably, against my will, I should open the drawers, would you forgive me?"

She was looking down.

"Look at me, Helen."

She raised her eyes.

"Yes," she said, "I will forgive you, I will even be glad—only you must promise never to be sorry for me. You may blame me, but you must never pity me. You may curse me, but

you must not exonerate me. For that, you see, would be to tinker with something that was mine. Then, later perhaps, you shall ask me, 'Was it worth it?'—and I will tell you the truth."

He lifted her hand to his lips.

"Thank you, Helen," he said.

Suddenly she felt light hearted and unselfconscious again. "Thank *you,*" she said, and then, "The explicit is much more restful than the implicit, don't you think?"

But, as he lifted her from the ground, his heart ached unselfishly, at the brightness in her eyes.

. . . . . .

"What a noise they all make," Helen thought, looking round the dining-room table, and she noticed, not for the first time, the penetrating carrying quality of whispers, whereas shrill, strident attempts to be heard get lost in the general clamour.

"Is it really exciting?" she wondered as she examined the cumulative effects of flowers and jewels and wine and noise, watched the perfunctory turn into the provocative, civil banalities take on an edge of challenge while here and there, a little pause filled by some glance or smile would give to a budding attraction a deepening touch of intimacy.

Next to her was the Austrian Ambassador,

grey, faded, distinguished, monotonous, with a breeding so perfect that the very fact of life seemed dimmed by contact with it, his presence acting as a soft lamp shade to a garish light of reality. His long and brilliant career had been due, rumour asserted, to a half-shut eye which had kept the foreign offices of the world —including his own—guessing. Was it an inspiration or a limitation? Many admired it as a delicate alibi for a super-penetrating vision. Everyone loves a mystery—Count Schröding's eyelid became legendary, a very symbol of sight.

He was talking gently to Helen, praising England, with the frankness of a lover sheathed in the courtesy of a guest. The food, he admitted, was atrocious, but then the police——

Helen's attention wandered. It came back at the name of Bismarck. Count Schröding had met him in 1877—in November—no, in December. The great man had talked very little, very little indeed, though he had, he remembered, expressed a liking for retrievers. Perhaps, however, it had not been on that occasion, but later.

When Helen refixed her thoughts on her neighbour, Bismarck had still not spoken and the Ambassador was turning to the other great men of his day, all of whom he had known, and telling her at length some of the things that he had said

to them. World figures are apt to be silent in the accounts of their intimates. Which of us in describing our conversations does not lay stress on our own (sometimes posthumous) remarks? Disraeli, Count Schröding continued, was the only Jew he had ever dined with. There had been primroses on the table sent by the Queen from Osborne. He had never before seen wild flowers on a dinner table. It had been a most interesting experience.

"He must have been a wonderful talker," Helen exclaimed.

"Yes," said the Ambassador, "many witty sayings are attributed to him. I, myself, never heard him talk much, but his clothes were always very strange."

Helen turned to her other neighbour, Lord William Cathcart, in whose wit she had often delighted. She remembered his once saying, "I gave up sentimental adventures when I found that I was becoming sentimental." Why, she wondered, had it stuck in her mind, he had said thousands of better things than that. At the time, it had seemed rather funny, but now remembering it, she thought it very serious. Everyone seemed to manage their lives so well, treating love as if it were a train to catch or a meal to eat. She felt a new interest in Lord William. He

appeared to her suddenly as a symbol of self-control, rather than of excess.

"Selina is looking very lovely," she said smiling, though it was not what she wanted to talk about.

"Selina is very intelligent," her father explained with guarded pride. "I wonder, Lady Helen, if she has been well or badly brought up."

"She has had no mother," it slipped out inadvertantly as unconsciously Helen thought of Lady Horsham and Cyril.

"No," Lord William agreed, "otherwise I should not have been allowed to bring her up so aware and cool and untouched. She is enquiring, you see, not inquisitive. I answer her questions so there is no suppurating curiosity. There have been no prurient inhibitions to spoil her innocence by showing it to her."

"It is wonderful," Helen looked at him a little wistfully, "to see her so pure and fresh and yet so sophisticated with all her penetration and her wit like polished steel. What will happen when she falls in love?"

"I wonder. That is what I wonder. It is, of course, a disintegrating process."

"Yes."

Suddenly Helen knew that she was talking about herself.

"But that doesn't matter. One has to break

up every now and again. It is the reforming that is important."

"But does everyone re-shape? Come together again, so to speak? Are there no huddled messes of broken bits by the roadside?"

The old man looked at her. Loving Cyril he had regarded his marriage with the gravest apprehensions; meeting Helen, he had fallen a victim to her charms, allowing his personal delight to lull his doubts to rest. He knew, of course, that her husband had never woken her up, but rather had walked on tiptoe for fear of disturbing that radiant, untroubled youth—only how could she go on sleeping, vibrant with life as she was, with those shining eyes lighting passions all around her? Surely Cyril, tortured and disciplined by his love, was preparing a worse tragedy for himself than if he had given way to that primitive passion which with prayers and fastings, he had trodden underfoot? And wasn't she even now asking him the price you paid for love, not in fear of the consequences, but in a proud, flaming welcome of its utmost penalty?

"They nearly always re-shape, my dear," he said, his eyes twinkling at her, for in his wisdom he knew that Youth's heart aches at the lightness of the risk, craving for itself ultimate dangers and fearing only the healing of its wounds.

"And have you never in your life known a broken heart?"

He thought it over. "I don't think so—I wonder—I have known broken lives. Is it the same thing?"

"No," she said, honestly facing the truth while she heard the Ambassador murmuring, "It was the first time I ever saw wild flowers on a dining room table," and catching her husband's eye, she rose.

"People are beginning to arrive for the dance," Helen explained to her guests, "so I must go and receive them. But please stay here and enjoy yourselves till the men come out."

"I like to see young people dance," said old Lady Raeburn comfortably, "it helps me to understand the cartoons in the papers."

"Are we very angular and jerky?" Selina asked.

"A little ungainly perhaps, my dear, and so detached. Why your partners pick you up and put you down like bits of loose luggage."

"*De la mesure dans tout,*" said Mrs. Blaine as if she were quoting someone. "The intemperate is very ugly."

Lady Raeburn looked at her with contempt.

"Intemperate? There is nothing intemperate about the young people I know. Indifferent,

that's what they are, and impersonal. It's such a pity to be impersonal, don't you think?"

"But one must select," persisted Mrs. Blaine a little plaintively.

"A little loose fire, that's what I like," snapped Lady Raeburn with spirit, "you can't spend your life waiting to like or be liked. Keep your susceptibility ready, it's half the battle. Who wants to play on an untuned piano?"

"How is Lisa?" Lydia Hathaway asked (Lisa was Lady Raeburn's daughter-in-law).

"Very susceptible—I mean quite well, thank you." The old lady was smiling grimly.

"I would like to be like Lisa," Selina was enthusiastic, "she is so charming—so very charming —I like to see her walk into a room with that sort of shrinking sureness."

"Quite right, my dear—'shrinking sureness,' those are the words. Lisa is always drawn gently along the path of her choice. She is a very clever woman. Don't imagine that I am not fond of her. I like her very much indeed. She never looks back. Lisa is a person."

"Yes," Lydia smiled, "Lisa is full of what you call 'loose fire'."

"So different from Helen," Lady Raeburn continued, "with her vivid serenity. A dancing manner and a calm heart. Lisa's beautiful quiet-

ness is protective colouring. She needs it with farces and tragedies jostling inside her."

"And Helen," Lydia asked—they were talking alone, with Selina laughing in a group and Mrs. Blaine murmuring something about the essential unity of art—"Helen can't stay calm, can she?"

Lady Raeburn's expression softened, "No," she said, "and Helen is a romantic. So, of course, is Cyril, but she doesn't know it. Couldn't you tell her, Lydia?"

"Why doesn't he tell her himself?"

"He has proved it, I think, but only in omissions—and she was too young to be able to read that language."

"Dear Cyril," Lydia sighed, "I do love him."

"So do I. If only Evelina weren't such a damned fool, everything would have been different."

"But so would Cyril," Lydia objected. "Perhaps too different."

"Yes," agreed Lady Raeburn, "my brother was no doubt the great sufferer. How he did detest his wife. I remember when Cyril was born he said to me, 'Alicia, do you realize that this child will have bits of both Evelina and me? It is enough to make a god laugh,' and I retorted feebly, 'Well, you married her.' 'And apparently I'm to perpetuate her too,' he added savagely."

"He would have loved Helen," Lydia murmured.

"It is easy to love Helen."

Lydia was forty and her hair was fading, rather than changing, from fair to grey, while the lissomness of her figure had drifted into a sort of irresolute thinness. It is a terrible thing, that steady drain of spinsterhood, how not having children and illnesses and anxiety and quarrels gradually turns out the colours in a woman, though the most desolate "personal" life, marriage to a drunkard or a bully or a gambler nevertheless leaves the lamp lit, eyes able to shine, lips able to smile . . . Lydia was a very remarkable woman indeed. She had vitality, sanity, courage, humour and imagination. To be in her company was like a delightful holiday on some sunny, windy down with a hint of a hidden dancing sea in the air. Her acute penetration and her crisp, sub-acid touch united to a depth of warm healing devotion and self sacrifice made her universally —almost too universally—beloved. Everyone went to her with their sorrows and some people even with their joys, for Lydia had that rarest of all gifts, she could not only sympathize when things went wrong—she could even rejoice when they went right. And Helen, though they neither of them knew it, had gone to her with her loneliness.

The men had come out of the dining room, the dancing had begun. Helen, shimmering in silvery gold, was smiling and welcoming and waiting. All the windows were open and the flower-scented night air invaded the rooms, mingling with the sounds of the strings and the glitter of lights and jewels. You didn't know where one sense ended and another began.

Quite suddenly Helen felt her heart stop beating. She turned round and found herself face to face with Toby. Of course she had known he was there before she had seen him, only it seemed absurd somehow that he should be bowing over her hand and greeting her like a guest. Perhaps it was better so—that their intimacy should take on the guise of acquaintanceship made it all the more precious and lovely and secret, like an unseen vision flitting through the room, the more real for being vouchsafed only to them.

But from that moment, she couldn't keep control of her eyes. Always they were following him through a maze of dancers or losing him for a moment, they would find him again in some distant corner with Selina, laughing and concentrated. "He isn't wondering about me," she thought forlornly. "Not even his eyes——"

"Please don't be so conspicuous, Helen." Christopher was beside her.

"What do you want me to do?"

"To come out on the terrace for a moment."

"I think I'd rather dance."

"Who is that Lady Horsham is dancing with?" Toby asked Selina.

"Christopher Tyldesley."

"He looks very charming."

"Christopher? Christopher is the most charming person in the world. We do all so terribly wish that he would stop loving Helen."

"And won't he?"

"Not he. He has adored her for years. Literally worshipped the ground she treads on."

"Is that a good system?"

"Probably not. But Helen is like that—she always gets from people exactly the quality she wants. She doesn't seem to notice anything else. Perhaps her own divine invulnerability helps."

"Is she so cold?"

"Is coldness and invulnerability the same thing to you?" she asked quickly.

"No, of course not," he coloured slightly, as if she had caught him in some error of taste.

"Helen is superhuman—alive and aloof. I don't know how she manages it. A flaming nun —even to hardened old *roués* like my father, the air she breathes is sacred."

Toby felt strong and triumphant and a little brutal. The house belonged to him, with its tapestries and its traditions. It was a mirage dissolving at the blast of his trumpet.

He went up to Helen. "Will you dance with me?"

She was in his arms—submerged suddenly in some pool of peace. The room had ceased to exist and the people— She only knew that his arms were round her and that when she looked up his face was very close and his eyes were intent and smiling—boring holes in her eyes. They walked out.

"Isn't it lovely, the night?" she said. "There are fireflies and dew and shadows like grey mother-of-pearl."

"Helen," he said, he had got both her hands, "you are going to kiss me." He held her in a grip of iron. Slowly she bent towards him, kissing his cheek.

"Not like that," he said, drawing her lips into his, hard and masterful and greedy.

"Oh," she said brokenly, "you shouldn't have done that." She didn't know that anyone could be so disregarding, so satisfying—Silently they walked back to the house.

She danced and danced, shutting her eyes, trying to keep his kiss on her lips.

The Ambassador and Lord William were talking. Toby was introduced to them.

"Helen is the best hostess I know," Lord William was saying, "so gracious, so skilful, and what a witty talker."

"In all of my experience," the Ambassador, as always, spoke with authoritative melancholy, "I have never seen anyone like her. Beautiful, radiant, glowing and without adventures. Human laws are unknown to her and divine ones would be unnecessary, but perhaps," he added cautiously, "men are not what they were when I was young. I remember the old Emperor William saying at Potsdam—no, I think it was Berlin . . ."

Toby was elated. Count Schröding had put the seal on his evening. Europe had fallen before him. "And what an amusing, clever woman she is," he thought, "what a fascinating mind——"

Gradually, the dancers dispersed. Drawn curtains and blazing chandeliers couldn't keep out the grey, dispassionate dawn which poked disillusioning fingers through every chink.

"Did you enjoy yourself, darling?" Helen murmured to Selina as they walked up to bed.

"Oh, so much. I danced a lot with that young man, what's his name? Ross. He is very intelligent, but with just a little touch of the conquering hero, don't you think?"

"Yes—no—I don't know," said poor Helen. But alone in her room, creeping into bed, the air still smelt of jasmine, his arms were round her, his eyes were smiling into hers, his burning lips were on her mouth cooling the fevers inside her and—there was to-morrow.

CHAPTER VII

HELEN, coming down late, found the house-party scattered. Mathew and Virginia had escaped somewhere. The Ambassador, Lord William and Lydia were watching the lawn-tennis players, especially Mrs. Blaine who without a ruffled hair or a hurried movement seemed always to have the ball on her racquet. Christopher was hovering about.

"Mrs. Blaine is very English," murmured the Ambassador, "competent and composed. Has she ever loved, Lord William?"

"Not me, Excellency."

"What is there under that calm surface—desires? Discontent? Complacency?"

"Whatever there is swims about in cold water."

"The English woman is an interesting study," continued Count Schröding. "She gives herself so completely. There are no reserves. It is as if a fish not only swallowed the bait, but tried to climb up the line. No asking to be played, no

little protests. Whereas a French woman requires a protestation between each hook and eye, while she calls God to witness that she is *une honnête femme.*"

"And you both pretend to believe? She in your oaths, and you in hers?" Lydia spoke a little drily.

"We both do believe," Lord William smiled. "Faith is a necessary part of our vanity."

"I am glad I am an old maid," laughed Lydia. "At least I can keep my vanity to myself instead of having to invest a little of it in someone else."

"He might pay a very high rate of interest."

Helen joined them.

"What are you talking about?"

"Love," said Lord William.

"Love affairs," amended Lydia.

"To me it is very sad to have that distinction made," ruminated the Ambassador, "there was a very clever lady-in-waiting to the Empress Frederick. I met her at Marienbad—no, I think it was Aix—I cannot be sure, my memory is not what is was in—82 or—83. She said, 'We are all matches that strike on many boxes. It would be simpler if one could only light once.' "

"Perhaps temptations are put there for moral purposes—to strengthen our virtue," suggested Lydia.

"Or for growing purposes—to water our natures," amended Lord William.

"You're both so unselective," laughed Christopher. "Lydia takes it for granted that we always resist and Lord William that we always fall."

"You are not giving us your view, Lady Horsham."

"Helen is tolerant and untempted," Lydia explained.

"Temptations make one very censorious," agreed Lord William, "if you are virtuous you condemn the wicked and if you are wicked, you condemn the virtuous."

"In which camp is Mrs. Blaine?" Christopher asked.

"She is one of those women who always see themselves *en tableau vivant*. One day it is the aloof and the next day the passionate and as she can never altogether relinquish the alternative rôle, she never quite achieves either attitude."

"Where are Mathew and Virginia?" Helen asked.

"Together."

"What a divine answer, Christopher."

"And they," Count Schröding was full of mild, persistent curiosity, "do they love?"

"Don't you know Mathew's remark to Mar-

garet Truro?" Lydia asked. "She said to him, 'Do you love Virginia?' and he answered, 'Most of the time.' 'Not all of the time?' 'Certainly not. How then should I have any opportunities of discovering that I loved her?' "

"What a wise man," chuckled Lord William.

"Poor Virginia," sighed Helen. "She loves him—all of the time, and he is never quite there—not the whole of him shut in by her."

"Is it necessary to be shut in?" Christopher asked.

"There must be a lock somewhere—you can't live in a pergola."

"Will they marry?" Lydia turned to Lord William. "Give us your view—you who know everything."

"I wonder. Of course, Virginia is a widow which is a convenience. There are no parents to say that she is seeing too much of him, thus reminding her that she is seeing too little. The question is can she afford to marry him, loving him as she does? Could she keep him if he were tied to her? Could she be indifferent for all of those necessary moments which alone make marriage a success?"

Helen was clasping her hands. Necessary indifferent moments, how did one achieve them?

"Mrs. Stirling is a very attractive woman,"

the faintest glow of admiration coloured the Ambassador's grey voice.

"And so gallant," Lydia added, "always trying to make Mathew feel free."

"Free of her?"

"Free enough of her to come to her."

Helen smiling intimately to herself, was sure that love was not complicated like that. It wasn't a question of being brave or wise—of taking a step forward or a step back. One was rushed along. Someone said, "Kiss me," and one obeyed.

The tennis players had stopped. Selina with her thatched yellow head, her wide open, wide apart eyes and her blunt nose made a perfect contrast to Mrs. Blaine, tall, slim and pointed, with her gleaming coppery hair and her eyes a little too close together. Someone had once described her as half a ferret and half a Luini.

"Isn't it too hot to talk about love?" she asked.

"It is too hot to talk about anything else," asserted Lord William.

"I am feeling very platonic," Mrs. Blaine murmured.

"Who is your victim?" Selina enquired a little rudely.

"Which of us could vouch for our self-control?" Lord William's gallantry was unfailing.

"It is altogether a Sargent water-colour day—

the bright effects of light—don't you think?" Mrs. Blaine always regarded nature as an *aide-mémoire* to art.

"As a young man I painted a little in water colour," explained the Ambassador in his most melancholy tone of voice. "I am afraid I was never anything but a dilettante. I remember the Emperor Francis Joseph pointing to a little sketch I had done of Mount Etna—quite a little sketch with a sunrise in the background. Have you ever seen Mount Etna at sunrise? A very beautiful spectacle. I might almost say unique, but perhaps that would be an exaggeration. The Emperor asked by whom the little picture had been painted and when I told His Majesty that it was my own handiwork, he graciously omitted to make any comment."

Selina suppressed a laugh. Lydia's smile was so discreet that the Ambassador could accept it either as a friendly response to his anecdote or—supposing it to have been conscious—an exquisite recognition of his irony. Lord William chuckled a little. Mrs. Blaine murmured something about planes and dimensions. Helen was wishing that she were alone so that she could shut her eyes and be with Toby. Then for the thousandth time, she would be able to go over the scene of the night before, luxuriating first in the irrelevant de-

tails—the white roses gleaming in the distance, the white peacock strutting along the terrace—only allowing her thoughts to approach, as it were on tiptoe, the ultimate ecstasy of his kiss.

Christopher was wondering why Helen was so silent—Helen who adored conversation, who loved spinning topics like tops, throwing ideas into the air like coloured balls and juggling with them.

Selina was admiring her hostess and trying to imagine what brooding dreams had engulfed that usual taut eagerness which made her life seem like a golden leash from which she must at any moment burst free.

Mathew and Virginia joined them—Virginia's pale, irregular charming face strained with her own happiness.

Mathew whimsical, smiling, detached, able to drop things without breaking them and to pick them up without stooping. Life itself could not resist Mathew.

"Do you know," Helen asked, "that we have a cricket match this afternoon?"

"Good Lord!" groaned Mathew.

"Delightful," said the Ambassador, with a tone of voice that emptied the word of any excessive enthusiasm.

"Hurrah!" Selina was enchanted.

"Our side of the county are going to play the Overton side," Helen continued, "only we must win because we've got Black."

"Black?" the Ambassador's tone was judicially ignorant.

"*The* Black—Harry. The one who plays for England. Fancy he's the son of our very own village green grocer. We're so proud of him that we rarely talk of anything else between April and September. After the last test match all of the local papers had headlines, 'Helen's Court to the Rescue.' Last year his mother and I motored the whole way to Canterbury together and he made a century against Kent."

"How very democratic," murmured the Ambassador.

"Oh *no!*" Helen repudiated the word which seemed to her cold and hard, reeking of dogmas and formulæ, and quite absurdly undescriptive of that long motor drive, with Mrs. Black telling her a thousand anecdotes of Harry's youth, his every monosyllable shining with the radiance of her mother love. After the match was over mother and son had gone off to tea together—he proud and shy and awkward, she beaming and tearful, while Helen, aching with envy, had talked drearily to local magnates until it was time to drive back. And going home, she had

sat on the box of the motor so that the Blacks could have the inside to themselves, though she had longed hungrily to be with them, feeling, for the first time in her life, desperately, emptily out of it.

She smiled a little bitterly at the Ambassador. No—democratic did not describe that day.

"Really, my dear," Lord William looked lovingly at Helen, "for a lady with a Cosmopolitan upbringing, you make Helen's Court almost too patriarchally English."

"You oughtn't to refer to my disreputable youth—Lady Horsham blushes when Cyril mentions Italy."

"Italy," the Ambassador, who had not been listening, caught the last word. "A beautiful country. The King is a most intelligent man, a little too like a President perhaps, but very well informed."

"Il faut savoir son métier," Mrs. Blaine, as usual, used her irrelevant French, *"même si c'est un métier de roi."*

"It is certainly becoming a very difficult one," said Lydia, "being constitutional can't be much fun and yet how dangerous not to be and how impossible if you've got no dramatic sense and no presence."

"Virginia would make rather a good King," Mathew explained, "she is full of public spirit

and irrelevant zeal and a desire that everyone should have fresh air and good music and the sort of plays they don't want to go to see."

"Don't you believe him," Virginia protested, "I only want everyone to have enough leisure to be able to go to the sort of plays they don't want to see."

"In other words, each person should have several idle hours in each day devoted to the rejection of opportunities?"

"Precisely."

Cyril joined them.

"What are you talking about?"

"Virginia is trying to be serious. She ought to have gone to church. She always comes back from divine worship feeling frivolous, but a few minutes of me are enough to turn her into a welfare worker," grumbled Mathew.

"It's your welfare, isn't it?" asked Lydia.

"I am afraid it's my 'good'."

"Your *own* good?" enquired Lord William. "How very dreadful!"

"Did you know, Excellency, that both Virginia and Helen were socialists?"

The Ambassador raised his eyebrows. He particularly disliked women with views.

"But they have everything," he objected, speaking a little more firmly than usual.

"Yes," Helen's whole attitude was curved into eagerness, "that is why. As Virginia was saying, it is not only hygiene and education that people are entitled to, but leisure. That is what the Americans lack—time to think about other things. Miners can't get it and millionaires can't use it. There is nothing so uncivilizing as allowing your mind to become the slave of your profession. The poor have to think about money and the rich can think of nothing else. Of course it's much worse in towns. Here in the villages we have our cricket and our flowers and our inns and lots of time to talk about politics and religion and live stock."

"Sport," said the Ambassador, attempting to regain a safe topic, "is a wonderful thing."

But Helen had got going. "I know it is absurd for me to preach," she said, "living in this divine house that I love so passionately. I couldn't give it up, I am not strong-minded enough, but if it were taken from me my conscience would be at rest. I should take a cottage in the village where I know every cat, dog, child and canary. It would be my home just as it is my home now. No accident of ownership could touch that. And Helen's Court would belong to me still because no one could ever love it quite as much as I do."

"Yes," reflected Lord William, "but I find that it's keeping things that keeps the life in them."

"Virginia on the other hand," Helen continued, "really is entitled to preach. She works herself to the bone in slums without" (Helen was characteristically thinking of what she herself would most miss) "seeing a growing flower month in and month out."

"But I love my pearls," Virginia smiled reassuringly at the Ambassador, and if Count Schröding felt that this was not a sufficient guarantee of her fundamental right-mindedness, his affection for her and the standard of comfortable and comforting acceptances that he set himself forbidding him to probe any further, he accepted the olive branch that she offered him in the shape of her taste for jewels.

And Helen, who always made herself wretched by inventing individual cases, began to see a ragged child looking into a toy shop window, an unemployed navvy with his starving dog, and a musical miner having to sell the flute which was the pride of his life——

While Mathew, watching Virginia, wished that she didn't look so tired and thin and though he wished it a great deal for his own sake, he wished it a little bit for hers too—and that little bit was a part of the indefinable something that made

Virginia the only altogether real thing in his life.

"Madame la Comtesse est servie."

The portentous familiarity of Jean's tones seemed—as it always seemed—to give to life an absolute well-ordered stability. To hear him was to feel yourself surrounded by the whole massed forces of bye-gone centuries. How could one hope to break through, entering life as one does, not choosing, but chosen? As Mrs. Blaine would say, "Everything is a part of something else."

And so Helen getting up and calling "Lunch" to her guests felt that perhaps she ought to have called "Fate."

. . . . . .

"Cricket," said Lady Raeburn, sipping her coffee, "a tiresome game. The catches are always either missed by the players or the onlookers."

"Wait till you see Black throw in, Aunt Alicia. It is the most beautiful sight worthy of the Australians."

"I do not care about Australians," continued the old lady firmly, "nor any other colonial for that matter."

"The British Empire is a wonderful thing. The word 'colonial' is perhaps a little unfortunate, but 'our brethren from overseas' is certainly rather long."

The tonelessness of the Ambassador's voice had one great merit—you could never be sure if he were serious or not.

"My husband believed in the Empire," explained Lady Raeburn, "he always called Indians, 'niggers.' So foolish, don't you think? and quite unnecessary. Fortunately he never went there or it would have been almost rude."

"Well, I must be going down to the pavilion." Helen left Count Schröding and her aunt to talk quite happily on parallel lines while she and Selina walked down to the cricket-ground. Spreading her guests on comfortable chairs, she went to greet the players when suddenly she heard Selina, say, "Hullo, Mr. Ross."

Helen stood quite still, feeling little dizzy waves breaking all over her. Why hadn't she expected him? Of course he was bound to come, only she had been thinking back all the time, leaning on remembered joys. Is it the cowardice or the wisdom of love that makes us cling to perfect moments that have gone, sunning them with our thoughts, clutching at the certainties of the past as if in our heart of hearts we knew that in the turmoil of the future lies nothing but broken hopes and raging doubts and—at the end perhaps —an aching void?

Toby came up to her smiling into her eyes.

"I must go and get ready," he said, "Helen's Court has got to be defeated."

"Are you playing?"

"Yes, indeed."

He went on, leaving her with the unrest lit inside her which she always felt when he was near and yet not with her.

"I must pull myself together," she thought desperately, sitting down next to Christopher, though she knew that the very quality of his charm was an irritant because it was not Toby's charm, and was therefore sailing under some false flag of delightfulness, just as his love, exquisite and tender and unselfish, seemed an unreal exasperating thing because it was not Toby's masterful egotism which appeared to her as the very flame of passion. Somewhere or other she knew that Toby didn't love her—but she had lost the key to the drawer in which she had put this knowledge and what woman in love will force the lock of her own disillusionment? With unseeing eyes she watched the cricket, with unhearing ears she listened to the conversation. The brilliant green of the grass, the dazzling white figures, the glaring sun, the buzzing talk gave her a dazed feeling. Suddenly, through the blurred afternoon, she saw Toby walking out to bat. Lissom, firm, with iron muscles, the hard perfection of his body veiled

as it were by the grace of his movements, unhurried, almost indolent he went forward, smiling faintly as a cat might smile at a mouse. And Helen remembered his arms around her and felt again her body dissolving at his touch— She was alive now—feverishly—her eyes dancing at the movements of his bat, her face lit up as she watched him run. Every movement that he made went through her. She was the ball and the bat, it was she who was running. Then, in a moment, it was over. He skied the ball to mid-on and was caught.

Helen felt very tired, as if she had been running for hours and hours. Toby walked back as slowly as he had walked out. He had taken his cap off and the sun shone on his red gold head. He went into the pavilion to wash his face, very hot and rather annoyed. Nothing had gone as he had meant it to. It was idiotic to hit out, before one was set and just the sort of thing he prided himself on never doing. It was simply a lack of self-control. It had all been Helen's fault really, seeing her sitting there radiant and luminous, lit up by the sight of him, her eyes full of confident intimacy, as if he belonged to her. He had been a fool to kiss her like that—God knew what she expected of him now. But who could have supposed that she would capitulate so easily? He had thought that she was as hard

as he was. And she was fascinating, there was no doubt about that, really interesting—one of the most interesting women he had ever met. Only—one could never be too careful.

"A very inglorious performance, I am afraid," Toby sat down between Helen and Selina.

"Very gallant we thought," Selina retorted, "you naturally wanted to come back to us."

"Naturally."

His hand was lying on his lap and Helen was looking down at it. She wanted to be able to take away every finger of it, printed on her mind. She wanted to touch him— Very faintly she leant against him, and as she felt the rounded leanness of his body a hot wave went through her and she shut her eyes.

"It is delightful that you should be able to fail," Selina's light voice went on.

"Is that an attack?"

"Of course," she laughed, "what is your defence?"

"Must I defend myself?"

"Please do—I should find out such a lot about you. Only don't begin, 'My father taught me to be self-reliant.' You weren't going to begin like that, were you?"

"Not quite like that. But my father did teach me to be self-reliant."

"How?"

"Well, he was poor and an iron disciplinarian."

"And then what happened?"

"He died and my uncle made a lot of money."

"And the self-reliance turned into self-confidence?"

"You are very severe."

Toby never could resist indifference. It was the one weak spot in his armour. Selina's light insolence, which she managed to empty of any of the flattering quality that her curiosity might have contained, was a challenge he instantly accepted. He smiled his most sphinx-like smile at her—a smile like some tortuous stream provoking you to seek its source.

"I only wondered when one hardness was joined by the other,—when you began to exploit your self-control."

She was diabolically right, Toby thought It would be fun to see her humble and adoring——

He had never wanted Helen to be that. He had neither loved her nor wanted her to love him. The first time that he had kissed her it had been an experiment and the second time a childish assertion of masterfulness, a little boy singing, "I am the King of the Castle." He had meant her to be a divine, very complicated friend. Someone to whom he could bring great chunks

of things and who would return them to him, strained through the sieve of her exquisite fastidiousness. It was her sensitiveness, her perceptions, the quality of her mind that fascinated him. Of course, there was to have been a faint flavouring of emotion to their intimacy, the stirrings of an unacknowledged undercurrent. When he kissed her hand, her lips would have been allowed to tremble a little, she would have been permitted to avert dim, bright eyes— But their relationship would have been guarded and guided by her irony, that edge of sub-acid penetration that he loved and which had, contrarily, got lost in her love for him.

Life was like a bad producer, casting everyone for the wrong parts—passionate intellectuals, unsusceptible athletes, middle-aged Romeos, Venuses with the souls of spinsters, old maids with the hearts of Juliets. It was as if the wrong works had been put into a lot of clocks.

Even Helen with all her insight was blinded to Cyril's love by his aloofness and to Toby's indifference by his *élan.* It was only through bitter disillusionment that she was to learn that intellect is not a guard against passion or physical fitness a guarantee of it. And yet it is in youth, with its cool loveliness of morning dew, that we expect to find our furnaces.

"It is not that I am severe," Selina continued, "it is simply an idiosyncrasy of mine not to like conquering heroes."

"Then you should surely be indulgent to me after my performance this afternoon."

"Oh, but a conquering manner is not necessarily connected with conquests, is it?"

Toby was nettled. He wasn't accustomed to being snubbed by young women.

Helen was angry, envious and relieved. Angry and relieved that Toby should be resistible, while at the same time, she envied Selina's cool detachment and longed for a little indifference with which to make him love her.

"Mathew and Virginia have disappeared again," Christopher explained. "Mathew is in one of his extravagantly devoted moods, what Virginia calls painting the copy on the top of the picture."

"How does she manage it," Helen murmured, "the being so clear about it all, I mean?"

Christopher smiled at her. "It's ruining her health. Look how thin she is getting. Loving Mathew would be bad enough, but to love him and understand him is enough to kill anybody."

"Virginia is a wonderful woman. She can even resist the absence of obstacles—she wants the absolute ultimate Mathew and though she has

a little bit of it—she is the only person who has —she knows that if she married him, the very gift of his name would be a rubbing in of the things he hadn't given her."

"And she hasn't married him?" Toby was fascinated.

"No."

"It is almost too Henry Jamesian, is it not?" The Ambassador had joined them while Helen was speaking, accompanied by Mrs. Blaine who murmured ineptly, *"C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas l'amour,"* and Lady Raeburn who remarked cryptically, "It is only necessary to marry once."

"Dear Lady Raeburn," expostulated the Ambassador, "you should surely not speak like that before an unmarried girl."

"Nonsense," retorted the old lady, "nothing that we say will affect the question of whether Selina finds one or more uses for her wedding ring after she marries."

The cricket had settled down to an inevitable draw. Helen was walking about talking to villagers and neighbours—more even than usual the groups of tumbling children prodded an old wound. If only she could deflect this surging flood that was battering inside her. No one could go through life without loving—being loved was

nothing—it hardly counted. She thought of Cyril. He never seemed to have cared passionately for anyone. Of course, she knew that he was fond of her—very fond—and so sweet to her. She remembered how wonderful her new life had seemed—no more attempts to sooth irate landladies, no more intricate schemes to avoid creditors, above all no more being shouted at. The whole of her youth seemed to have been punctuated by shrill, macaw-like tones mingling with guttural snarls. And out of it all she had come to the serene beauty of Helen's Court, the thrilling bits of London blazing with responsibilities giving way to long months of quiet usefulness in the country. She had been able to be—indeed it would have been difficult not to—calm and charitable and beloved. If her imaginative insight had been deepened by her own wretched childhood, her emotions had remained as untouched as they were before her marriage. Cyril was a knight errant, a brilliant enchanting rescuer. She never thought of him as a lover. He had brought her peace. Of the love he had given her she knew nothing, for it had been a great love, great enough to conquer its own passion. But, as gunpowder cannot stand the proximity of lit matches, so the fires that Helen tried to kindle on her hearth were ruthlessly stamped out to avert the dangers of

a conflagration the very possibility of which she had never dimly imagined. Shivering a little, longing for warmth, how was she to know the quality of the gift that had been made to her—an icicle from the equator?

Stumps were drawn, the crowd was dispersing. A hush had settled like a moth on the day. Walking back to her guests Helen felt a curious sense of lassitude. She had been tired by the unsatisfactoriness of her day, by Toby sitting next to her talking to Selina. It wasn't that she was jealous. It was that she had felt unfulfilled, as if she had been walking about for hours with a limb missing. Toby could so easily have made her happy. A look would have done it, or an intonation. He need only have said "we"; she would have been so elated, shut into a pronoun with him like that. Wearily she tried to think that he had been sheltering her, preventing her from giving herself away. But she knew with the clear-eyed honesty of depression that it wasn't true. Even now, walking up to the house she hadn't got him to herself.

"When may I come and see the hollyhocks again?" she asked desperately, as he was saying good-bye.

"They are always waiting for you," he smiled one of his deep smiles at her. Some of them

seemed to dive into your eyes and some to skate over them.

Helen felt happy again—the weight off her heart. She would see him so soon, and they would be alone, quite alone, with the little ugly lamp bathing the Prince Consort in amber and a dark tangle of flowers outside. And he would hold her face in his hands and laugh at her for having been miserable——

"What are you thinking about?" Christopher asked.

"The Prince Consort," she answered turning a radiant face to him.

. . . . . .

"May I come in?"

Helen was resting before dinner. Virginia, the dancing irregularity of her face more enchanting than ever, sat down on her bed in a dressing gown.

"Darling," Helen murmured, "have you had a happy day?"

Virginia smiled—a tired, rather gallant smile.

"It is difficult, isn't it, to have a happy day? One goes hitching it on to the past and the future and then poor dear, it has such a load to carry."

"Especially the future," Helen agreed.

"Mathew says I am full of forethought and

arrière pensée. Perhaps it is true. But then to him, every moment is a soap bubble. The nastiest soap and water become rainbow tinted and he doesn't worry when it breaks because he can always make new ones."

"Mathew is an improviser of genius. Of course our bubbles always turn out not to be made of soap at all, but of china. And when they break they make an ugly mess and probably fall on something else and crush it."

Virginia was looking very grave, as if she had given her charming smile an afternoon off in order not to be bothered by it.

"It really is complicated, Helen, connecting things up, I mean. There is so much continuity in your life that I suppose it doesn't worry you—you with your, what was it Lady Raeburn called it? your 'vivid serenity'."

"I'm not like that really, you know," Helen's voice was curiously bitter. And Virginia realized quite suddenly that she was receiving a confidence—a discovery she confirmed by looking at Helen's face.

But all she said was, "I suppose not, other people's lives always look so absurdly simple. The great thing is to have rooted duties. I work in the East End and visit poor Harry's relations. But there is really no reason why I should, I

might just as well be nursing in Florence and calling on the English chaplain."

"Why don't you make a garden?" Helen asked.

"I might do that, or I might build a house, or I might stand for the L. C. C. The point is that I am absolutely my own mistress. It is the most tiring thing in the world. Everything I do is an act of my will. There is never any nice restful necessity."

"There is Mathew," Helen reminded her gently.

"Yes."

There was a pause.

Virginia had got her smile back. It was necessary to the consideration of Mathew. "I suppose that Mathew is a necessity," she admitted. "Helen! I am so frightened."

"Frightened of what?"

"That some day I may lose my nerve and marry Mathew."

"You will never lose your nerve."

"Sometimes when he goes away—right away—I want him so badly that I feel I would do anything to keep him, even in bondage, even though I know that one outstretched hand would lose him to me forever."

"Poor Virginia," Helen was stroking her hair, "don't you see that you are Mathew, you are his reality. It sounds a little high falutin', but I think

you are his soul. So he is never really away from you."

"I am getting hysterical in my old age, I'm so tired—tired out by Mathew's inverted commas, by his charm that never lets one go." She pulled herself together and laughed a little, a laugh that was nearly a sob, "I don't know how to explain to you about Mathew's charm. It is like a swarm of mosquitoes always biting one. I can never get away from it and yet it doesn't become a part of our intimacy. It never seems to dissolve into our love."

"It sounds dreadful," Helen said, "but of course it is Mathew. Triple essence of Mathew. That absurd charm of his that walks about on its hind legs and does tricks for us. Naturally we're maddened. It is like living with an actor who does his parts at home. But if we could cure him, we should have killed Mathew."

Virginia considered it.

"Yes," she said.

"Of course," Helen went on, "you are such an old missionary always wanting things a little better. Oh, I know, darling, it is not for their good, but their happiness and that you are continually trying to give divine irrelevant useless things to people. Only Mathew is a sort of work of art, and we really can't touch it."

"I know," Virginia sighed, "but the strain of not doing every day of your life something that every bit of you is aching to do."

"Perhaps someday you will be able to do it."

"I shall be worn out by then, old and ugly and undesirable."

"That won't matter so long as Mathew has grown a shadow or whatever it is that he lacks."

"Harry was so settled," Virginia said reminiscently, "it was like living with a clock. Clocks are rather nice, don't you think? They keep one company without waking one up."

"I think clocks *are* rather nice," Helen said.

They smiled at one another.

"Do you think that you appreciate Cyril?" Virginia asked, "or am I being impertinent?"

"Of course you're not being impertinent. As for Cyril, he is one of the most delightful people in the world."

"If only you knew what a saint he is, you would make more allowances for him, I think."

"Allowances? Surely that is the last thing in the world that he needs."

Virginia smiled a little sadly, "How vicariously wise we are! I must go and dress."

Helen pulled down her head and kissed her.

"Is it worth it?" she asked.

"Oh, so worth it."

Virginia was thinking of Mathew. Helen was thinking of Toby.

CHAPTER VIII

TOBY was working when her note was brought to him—"May I come to-morrow? Helen."

"Will you tell her ladyship that I shall be delighted?" he said to the groom.

He reflected that it was a little ungracious of him not to have written. It would have been so easy to write her a line—a little glad, loving line, he told himself. But he knew that that was just what he was unable to do. He could have written her a long, rather intricate letter—a letter about philosophies of life—or rather a letter entirely about himself. But he could not write her a note because in the circumstances, a note would irrevocably become a love letter—a few words shining like lamps, glowing with an ultimate brevity which he was very far from desiring. And so once more his instinct as a Don Juan—and isn't a Don Juan further removed from a real lover than a celibate priest or even

a married non-conformist!—enabled him to hide his irritated indifference in delicate discretion. He thought of Helen, or rather he thought her over. He couldn't deny the fascination of her mind, the almost imperceptible grip of her personality. The faint aroma of prestige which clung to her like a scent appealed alike to his fastidiousness and to his vulgarity. If she had shown to him the radiant aloofness, the warm impersonal quality she showed to other people, he would have worshipped her—or even perhaps have loved her. But seeing her nervous and propitiatory, wracked by her new happiness which was so largely misery, he felt like an enthusiastic recruit overtaken by peace before he has fired a shot. Perhaps the artist in him was offended, the artist who had loved her untouched perfection, the vivid sympathy which came so entirely from her imagination, so essentially not from her own personal experience. He liked to think of her imprisoned in the beauty of Helen's Court, her life regulated by the ordered serenity of being Cyril's wife. The fact that she was unconscious of her husband's passion for her added the necessary touch of irony to his conception. He wanted to see her as a princess in a fairy tale over whom a spell has been cast to prevent her from ever waking up into a tortured personal life. And, inad-

vertently he had blundered into her sanctuary, an involuntary bull in an unchosen china shop.

When Helen arrived in time for dinner, his cousin Ned who had strolled in to see him was still there. She had on the same lace shawl, but this time he felt not so much the necessity of unwinding her as of disentangling himself. He wondered whether she would imagine that he had asked Ned on purpose to avoid a tête-à-tête. But, seeing the luminous softness in her eyes, he realized that suspicion would never play a part in her life, even though her very intelligence were sacrificed to the lack of it.

She turned the full light of her happiness on to Ned, talking to him, listening to him, asking him questions about himself, drawing him out in a thousand ways until his shyness vanished and with tumbling eagerness his incoherent hopes and ambitions toppled into her lap.

"Of course you must be a poet," she said with the fervour of absolute conviction while all the time she thought, "He will never know that this is perhaps the happiest hour of my life. People come to see one christened and married and buried, but all the great moments pass by invisible, secret and passionate and unrecognised."

And, when Ned wanted to go she kept him, holding her happiness at arm's length, frightened

of its nearer approach, for he was defending the fort of her joy, the citadel that would collapse with fulfilment.

Toby was thinking, "She is trying to show me how charming she can be," little knowing how far removed from any art of fascination was this bursting flood of happiness in which Ned was submerged.

At last he got up to go. "You will let me come to see you?" he asked, entreaty in his voice.

"You *must* come to see me," she smiled, thinking that each time he came he would bring a little of this hour with him.

When he had gone, Toby said:

"You are always letting yourself in for things, aren't you? He will come and read you his poems and really he has not very much talent."

"Hasn't he?" she asked vaguely. The quality of Ned's poetry mattered so very little. It was altogether irrelevant, what he read to her would ring with the harmonies of the last hour, a stream of melody echoing through her mind.

They walked up and down the little garden and she leant against him, faintly because in the fullness of her love the faintest and the most passionate gestures were the same.

"You are so silent," he complained and quickly, to satisfy his tastes she described her life in vivid

arresting words, coloured with all the colours of her imagination made brighter and deeper by their dedication to him. And she wouldn't let herself realize that by repudiating the communion of their silence he had emptied it of the vibrant significance with which—to her—it had been filled.

He was pleased at the way she fell in with his mood. He loved to hear her talk, though sometimes he felt that she needed no words, that her brilliance was the small change which she gave to other people whereas he possessed a cheque filled in by the harmonies of her voice and the changing lights and shadows in her eyes.

And so they sat in the little room while she, out of the richness of her love, gave him not only the song, but the gramophone record which he wanted. Moths fluttered round the yellow lamp. The scent of the jasmine over-powered the air. Gradually a silence invaded the room. Quietly she got up —her questioning eyes full of their own answer.

"Take me in your arms," she whispered.

Passionately, his senses inflamed, he crushed her to him, kissing her. She broke free, frightened.

"Not like that," she murmured brokenly. He was glad that she had stopped him in time——

Together they walked home through the beech woods, her arm through his, her hair a scented

breath on his cheek. He could feel her quivering with response, like a moon trembling in the ripples of a pool. And, having recovered from his momentary flash of passion, he was wearied and exasperated, as if against his will he were being forced to play on an untuned Stradivarius.

"Let us sit down a moment," she said, and they lay on the moss, watching the black patterns of the trees on a luminous grey sky, while little wisps of mist floated in the air, the forgotten scarves of fairies.

She put her head on his shoulder and her surrender was more complete than any gift of herself would ever have been. Motionless, with her eyes shut, the whole of her mind and body faded into a trance of peace, without yesterdays, without tomorrows and even without dreams. Holding her like that he could feel the beauty of her body, but he was free again of the spell under which for one moment he had fallen.

"I have never even told her that I loved her," he thought irritably, excusing himself for being unworthy of her absolute unquestioning trust. "She hasn't even asked me." It was curious, he thought, this love of hers which had grown like a flower in the night, accepting its life simply, as a matter of course, without doubts or challenges. It was as if her intellect had suddenly abdicated

analysis. And through his irritation he envied her her love for him—envied its simplicity. Clearly she had as little dreamt of fighting it as a plant would dream of fighting its growth. To her it was as inevitable as the stars at night or the sun in the morning. And Toby, the ruthless simplifier, knew that Helen, subtle and sophisticated though she might be, had kept a pure spirit of life which no knowledge of the world had been able to touch and so her love for him was a deep pool in which neither memory nor experience had been able to cast a single reflection.

They walked on, down a secret path, through a secret gate past Helen's sweetbriar hedge and her gleaming white roses. Against one of the black yews a white peacock had spread its tail. Helen too was glimmering white in the luminous night. Silently she threaded her way through the open windows into the library. Suddenly everything was yellow and gold and Helen herself had become coloured again with amber lights in her hair and smiling coral lips. And with her mouth full of strawberries, she described committee meetings and Lady Horsham and the Ambassador and Virginia's struggle not to kill by marriage the goose that laid her golden eggs of ecstasy and torment.

She teased him about Selina, praising the flair that young lady had shown in providing just the

right number of rebuffs with which to capture him.

"My poor dear, one sniff forces the lock and two snubs bring down the fortress. What comes after that?"

Toby was amazed. Surely this dazzling, irresistible creature, gay and provocative and lighthearted, cream and amber and coral, was not the passionate romantic, white as mist and dark as shadows, who had lain in his arms under the beech trees, trembling like light on water.

Radiant, she spun absurd fancies, radiant she blew her iridescent bubbles and, together they raced across country with never a sign-post to guide them, their minds rushing like the wind over hill and dale.

Toby was intoxicated with delight.

At last he got up to go. She held out her hand. He kissed it.

"Good-night. Thank you—bless you," she said lightly, her smiling eyes still lit with the excitement of their talk. There wasn't a hint of tenderness in her voice.

Toby, walking home, felt that he had been dismissed. Paradoxically, for the first time he wished that he had kissed her.

Helen, climbing wearily up to bed, cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER IX

LONDON.
July ——

Helen to Toby

"Partings are arranged by a divine Providence so that one can look forward and look back and jumble the two up in a muddle of memories and longings. Almost everything can be lived through three times, in the future, the present, and the past. And they are all so different—the anxious going through things in imagination, every word carefully rehearsed and chosen, then the trance like disobedient reality refusing to admit that any plan was made for it, and finally, the touched up retrospect, consoling and out of focus—getting less and less like with time, probably not more faded but brighter. That is how memories are written. Someone remembers what they hoped would happen and in twenty years' time it has happened, of course. Aren't realities of the mind facts?

"I didn't think my letter was going to be like this—

"Lady Horsham is sure that all women in Russia have been nationalized. The thought of a single exception makes her either querulous or indignant. But Cyril won't let her enjoy them in peace, which seems to me so unkind and so unnecessary.

"God bless you.

"H."

LONDON.
July ——

Helen to Toby

"London *is* so hot. The pavement eats through one's soles and the beds in the park are simply inventories of flowers, making patterns.

"Lisa Raeburn came to see me (she is old Aunt Alicia's daughter-in-law). I wonder if you would think her attractive. Some people find her irresistible. She is very dark and moves slowly and smiles slowly and she is rather tragic and wonderful company. Just now she is in love with the most conventional man in the world—with spats. His not wearing a gardenia is so surprising that one feels that he *is* wearing one but that some unkind fairy has made it invisible. Lisa says that he is not like that really but,

though we feel that she must be right, it is impossible to get any corroborative evidence—especially for him.

"I go on writing like that about *des indifferents* because I know you like being amused. Why do you, Toby? Everyone is amusing—it is so tiring and so unnecessary—or necessary. As you like it, but not important or vital or real. Reality is you and the Prince Consort and Nimrod and the hollyhocks and all of the little ugly corners I visit in my dreams—lit up by a brass lamp. You don't understand that, do you? There are no irrelevant sanctuaries in your life where your lonely thoughts go to rest and pray. Do you know the Heine poem, "*Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam?*" We are all like that, longing for different happinesses which are all really the same old misery—only *you* don't seem to want fulfillment because abdication is a part of it.

"I am happier away from you than near you because then you are alone with me all of the time. . . . H."

LONDON.
July ——

Helen to Toby

"We are being as good as gold—killing not a few birds but whole aviaries with a series of

parties, each duller than the last. Cyril behaves incredibly well because to him nearly all people mean nothing except insofar as they might affect his personal standards by entangling him in the faintest gesture of irritation or discourtesy. I tell him that it is magnificent but not hospitality and he says, *"Touché"* in a way that makes me realize what an exquisite thing his standard of hospitality is—far too exquisite to be mixed up with mere entertaining. Have you ever noticed that about Cyril? How any criticism of him ultimately ends by convicting one of one's own crudity?

"I talk and I listen and I laugh and I eat and I sleep, at least I suppose I do, but when one's thoughts are divorced from one's acts—it is the acts that become unreal.

"God bless you. . . . H."

LONDON.
July ——

Helen to Toby

"I saw your friend Selina at a ball last night. She was treating all of her partners with that little air of detached disdain which you found so irresistible. Virginia was there too, in orange, her eyes shining like windowpanes with sunsets

reflected in them. She sat for quite a long time on a sofa with a tall, fair young man. They were very intent. Mathew explained to me that she was telling him about his life in generalizations. He said it was the most dangerously personal of all methods of conversation because there was literally nothing to stop one.

"I have been here four days—it seems such a long time.

"I met Netta in the street. She said, 'How is your young man?'—I said, 'Which young man?' and though I know I ought to have been cross with her for being so impertinent and vulgar, I felt nothing but absurd pride and happiness at hearing you called mine. Do you know what it means to me every time you say 'we'? How exalted and humble and happy I feel? As if you were crowning me with an everlasting halo that nothing could take off.

"God bless you. . . . H."

LONDON.
July ——

Helen to Toby

"I have been so longing to hear from you—longing so that I pick up my letters with reverent trembling fingers in case one of them should be from you. You don't know the bills and the in-

vitations that have been treated as love letters, slowly and deliberately opened so that I should be properly prepared. Do you know that I have never even seen your writing? Only I feel that I should know it at once. It would be nice to see the written 'Helen,' each letter making my name precious and vivid to me. How deeply it would be printed on my mind, every stroke a new bit of happiness.

"When I am tired and have ceased to try to steer my thoughts I hear your voice saying 'Helen' and it echoes through my mind like an unconsciously hummed phrase, till suddenly I realize what it is and it becomes a trumpet call waking me up to happiness.

"God bless you.

"HELEN."

LAVENDER COTTAGE.
July ——

Toby to Selina

"Dear Miss Cathcart,

"I was delighted to hear from Lady Horsham that you were seen at a ball making me many fellow sufferers.

"To show you how unjust is your estimate of my character, I am writing to ask you whether I may go to see you when I come to London.

Surely humility can go no further than my voluntarily subjecting myself to your barbed tongue?

"Yours sincerely,

"Toby Ross."

London.
July ——

Selina to Toby

"Dear Mr. Ross:

"They were of course not so much fellow sufferers as fellow criminals. I shall be delighted to see you, though I can't honestly advise you to come to London, which is intolerable just now. Fortunately Helen has been here for a few days, lovelier and more aloof than ever. Christopher Tyldesley came the whole way down from the very north of Scotland to see her for one day, which is not at all the way in which you approve of your sex behaving, is it?

"Yours sincerely,

"Selina Cathcart."

Brochan Lodge.
Inverness.

Christopher to Helen

"I have been miserable ever since I parted from you at the thought that I had worried or hurt

you. Precious darling, how could I do that? Surely you know that I love you enough not only to do things for you—anything—but even not to do them, which is far harder. If you hadn't wanted me to come to London to see you, you know you need only have said it. You seemed so pale and tired and remote with purple rims round your eyes and I never felt that I got near you at all. It was as if you had wrapped yourself in a mist. And when I longed to pierce through, it remained there cold and white and impenetrable. Am I imagining all this? It isn't that I have ever conceived that you could love me—God knows I have never been such a fool as that—but you didn't mind my loving you in old days, and now—Well, I feel that everything has changed.

"*Please* write and tell me that I am an hysterical ass imagining absurd things.

"God bless you.

"CHRISTOPHER."

Helen to Christopher

LONDON.
July ——

"Of course you were imagining absurd things. It was the result of your double journey—the one that was over and had brought you to me and

the one to come which was taking you away. That is the worst of a time limit—it makes each moment impossible, because you can't take it on its own merits but only as a worthy or unworthy representative of an hour or half an hour. Isn't it a horrible thought, each minute a delegate? As I get older that oppressive sense of time grows on me—I can never free the present of its own mortality.

"Christopher dear, if there was a mist, it was just as cold and white and wet for me as for you. Is that a consolation? It was a cloud with sun above and below it, only it was horrible that we should both have been caught in it.

"Forgive me——

"HELEN."

Mathew to Virginia

THE TRAIN.

"My companion has just got out. She had a veil, eyelashes, and newspapers that descended from the 'New Statesman' to 'The Tatler.' She never glanced at them. Every now and then she looked out of the window and smiled. I asked her if she had ever considered what the world would be like designed by various artists, vermil-

lion grass for instance. She said that she never had. She liked the uniformity of grass.

"I told her that travelling was very complicated. At the beginning of the journey one didn't know one's companion well enough to ask their name and at the end, one knew them too well. She said that it was less complicated not knowing peoples' names——

"She said that the people she met in trains were just like the people she met at dinner. It was as if she carried the same fate round with her. It was very tiresome. She never met the sort of man played by Norman McKinnel, just dozens of Dawson Millwards with a sprinkling of Du Mauriers.

"She asked me if I was in love. I said 'Yes'."

"She asked what you were called.

"I said 'Virginia.'

"Then there was a pause after which she murmured, 'Is it as complicated as all that?'

" 'As what?'

" 'As your not saying anything about it at all.'

" 'Perhaps I am discreet,' I hazarded.

" 'No.'

"I pulled myself together.

" 'Virginia is enchanting,' I said.

"Then she smiled—the whole of her face. It was delightful.

" 'Now you are thinking about her,' she said, 'when you said enchanting, there was no expression at all in your voice. Then I knew that you loved her, for when we love people every adjective is meaningless and irrelevant and absurd. Words become like beads exchanged by natives—they are no longer our own currency.'

"The train was stopping.

" 'I am so glad that you love 'Virginia,' she said as she got out.

"Are *you* glad?

"MATHEW."

Mrs. Blaine to Count Schröding

MON REPOS.

"Cher Ami,

"I am here drinking in unlimited peace under a blue dome. In this scented solitude I can at last meet my own thoughts. I am alone but not lonely for every robin is a drama and each butterfly is my guest.

"It would be delightful if you could come here and, of course, bring anyone you like.

"Yours very sincerely.

"ANTHEA BLAINE."

Virginia to Mathew

LONDON.

"But, Mathew, she must have been the most delightful woman in the world and you let her slip away like that, not to spoil it, I suppose. You never put a chain on any moment, do you? I think you manage your life as severely as any ascetic. Nothing is pushed or pulled or held down or shut in and so everything belongs to you by its own choice—and stays for ever.

"Am I glad that you love me? Mathew——

"Thank God you will never know what it means to me—if you knew you would cease to be you and then, who knows? I might stop loving you.

"VIRGINIA."

Cyril to Christopher

LONDON.
July ——

"My dear Christopher,

"I am going to take advantage of your invitation and join you for a week's fishing.

"I am afraid that Helen is too occupied with her blue poppy, or whatever its equivalent may be, to leave Helen's Court.

"Yours,

"CYRIL."

Helen to Toby

LONDON.
July ——

"I am coming down on Saturday—all by myself. Saturday night I will dine with you and we will eat roast chicken and bread sauce and gooseberry tart. I am so excited that I wish it were far further off. I want to go on looking forward to it for days and nights—dining with you a hundred times in my dreams, waking and sleeping.

"When I smile it is because I am thinking of the Prince Consort and if I cry, it is for the same reason. For the whole of the rest of my life, I think, when my thoughts are bruised and weary, they will go to rest in your room with the cavalier and his lady, with the cupids and the text and the faint smell of kerosene mingling with the jasmine and the stocks.

"Saturday is too near—I would have liked to see it slowly winding its way towards me through the future.

"HELEN."

CHAPTER X

TOBY was sitting in a little summer-house at the end of the garden when Helen's last letter was brought to him. It was, he supposed, an enchanting letter. He had always recognized a soaring quality in Helen, a quality that reminded him of *"Aufschwung."* Only when he had first known her, it had been evoked by her red brick walls or flowers or other people's happinesses and unhappinesses, whereas now it had become a part of her every gesture, you could find it at any moment in her eyes or her voice or the way she clasped her hands. Her love had made her life into a leash at which she was straining and from which she might, Toby reflected with alarm, at any moment burst free. Prudence, discretion, worldly wisdom, they all seemed to have dropped from her. It was as if in the very simplicity of her passion, there was no place for the sophistications of a lesser love.

The moments when we cease to play the game are the moments at which it ceases to be a game.

Toby felt that Helen lived rigidly up to her code of life. She was always trying to make other people happier, devoting herself to them, sacrificing herself for them, wearing herself to the bone on their behalf. No one was more considerate, more imaginatively sensitive to possible woundings, more passionately anxious to hurt no one. And yet she had never tried to stem her passion for him. No thought of Cyril seemed to have restrained her. Perhaps it was because she didn't know that her husband loved her. And yet "good" women are frequently deterred by other considerations.

It was all very puzzling. Puzzling and on the highroad to becoming an intolerable mess from which he would almost certainly extricate himself without credit. Toby thought of Helen as he had last seen her. Curling amber lights in her hair and laughing amber lights in her eyes—smiles playing hide and seek all over her face, peeping under half-shut lids and re-emerging triumphantly through open lips. The whole of her wayward and dancing and irresistible.

But while he tried to concentrate on that picture, another image forced it out of his mind—Helen, white as mist, her eyes sheets of shadow, trembling like a splintered moonbeam in a dark pool——

"Any man might well be in love with her," Toby thought, half grateful and half exasperated at the contrary providence which had saved him from so desirable and so complicated a fate. But he couldn't help cursing her for having allowed her love to wreck a relationship that he had planned with so much care and hope.

When he got her letter, he wrote:

"May dinner be at Helen's Court? Mary Ann is ill. T." It wasn't true, but he suddenly felt that the little room with the Prince Consort and the china cupids would be intolerable. She had somehow succeeded in filling it so full of significance that the very air seemed tight and taut and unbreathable. And so he shut her sanctuary to her, imagining the safe wide spaces of Helen's Court, the gold and brown library, her cream and apricot boudoir with the little touches of black and lilac and jade. Or perhaps he would even be able to persuade her to sit in one of the big impersonal family-portrait-studded drawing rooms with their heavy embroidered velvet curtains rather than in the long low upstairs gallery, dim and mysterious with the ghosts of forgotten tragedies.

Surely Helen's Court was not a leash, but a chain, with Jean and the inky yews guarding her from her love.

Toby, thinking of love, wondered whether he had ever really known what it meant. Wondered whether the numberless affairs, on which he had so easily embarked and from which he had so skilfully emerged, had ever taken him further than the threshold of some great and mysterious revelation. And then he remembered the young daughter of a Scotch minister in the North of Scotland, with tawny hair and a freckled nose and thick, light lashes. He saw her with his mind's eye in a red tam-o-shanter and a very short serge skirt, sturdy and active as a mountain pony, hardy and stoical and independent, proud and sceptical and dour. They had sat together on the moors one bitter winter's day while he had held her two hands to keep them warm, and he had thought only of the cold of her hands, not once of the warmth of his—Perhaps that was as near as he had ever come——

Her name had been Janet.

. . . . . .

Helen had filled her boudoir with bowls of roses and tall vases of black-purple and light blue delphiniums. In one corner was a growing gardenia bush and in another a mass of annunciation lilies with gleaming yellow eyes.

She had been bitterly disappointed when she read Toby's note. The Prince Consort and the

china cupids were her own sanctuary, sacred to her and far removed from prying eyes. No one entering that little room would want to share the vision of it, or would care to steal it as the visible loveliness of Helen's Court was stolen from her by every casual passer-by. It wasn't that she didn't love her house. She loved it passionately. Only she felt like a man married to a woman whose beauty is so great that it inevitably belongs to the eyes of all beholders. For it is the little intimate perfections which perhaps are not perfections at all, tiny imperceptible charms, uncoveted and unnoticed, that are our great gifts, for they can only be given to those who love us.

Helen, looking at her mother-of-pearl cabinet, glancing at the crystal goblet which had been Cyril's birthday present to her, moving here a cushion and there a flower, lighting dim lights that filled the room with gleaming mysterious radiance, longed for the red baize piano cover, the broken sofa, the brass lamp. And just as all the beauty that was Helen faded before a memory of light lashes and cold hands so the glory of Helen's Court shrunk into nothing beside an oleograph of the Prince Consort and a buttoned sky-blue satin what-not.

When Toby walked into the room the air was dizzy with the lilies and gardenias. Helen was

bending over a table and the lamp turned her hair into a mass of light. When she heard him she turned round and stood waiting for him, smiling as if he were coming to her through her thoughts. For a moment he too stood still, dazzled by her sheer loveliness. She seemed a part of the flowers, of the crystal and the mother-of-pearl. His own little room had been too real. When she walked into it she had been trying to walk into his life and in his life he had no room for her. But here she was part of a vision without yesterdays and without to-morrows.

Not saying a word, he walked up to her and drew her face towards him and kissed her.

They dined together in a little breakfast room, talking happily and intimately as they had talked before they knew one another.

"Your mind is a light, Helen. I feel it in the dark. I know what your eyes are looking like—I can see you by it."

"And in the light?" she asked, "can you see me then too?"

"Sometimes."

"Toby," she said and he could feel a throbbing urgency behind her low, restrained voice, "why do you keep losing me? Sometimes you make me feel as if you had mislaid me and sometimes you don't even look for me."

"Oh, my dear, it is so much less complicated than that. I simply try to get rid of you."

"But why?"

"It is so necessary, isn't it? We have met too late."

He wished he hadn't said that. The words were positively threadbare with use.

"No," she said passionately, "nothing is ever too late. Oh, my darling, it is a sin against Providence to talk like that. We might never have met at all. Think of it, never."

He thought of it. Yes, after all he was glad to have known her.

"I should have missed something very wonderful," he said, "you are rather wonderful, you know, Helen, I felt it at the bazaar."

"Dear bazaar."

"Only I was wrong about you. I thought you were hard."

"Yes, I know. Why did you?"

"You were so gay and cool and witty. Your armour was so complete—beautiful too—all turquoises like the one in Tutankhamen's tomb."

"And when did you find out that you were wrong?"

"I found it out. Quite soon I think. The first time you dined with me."

"And you were sorry."

"Yes."

"Are you still sorry?"

He looked at her across the table. Her hands were clasped under her chin. Her eyes were dark and unsmiling. He knew that she wouldn't flinch if he hurt her.

"I don't know," he said.

She didn't flicker an eyelash. Then he knew that he *had* hurt her.

She got up. He opened the door for her. They walked into the rosy light of her boudoir. She sat down and smiled at him, a little, amused indulgent smile. He wondered what had changed her mood.

"Why is it so important to be hard, Toby? Please tell me. I long to know."

"It is a sort of moral athleticism," he said, "it prevents one from giving way."

"It is a substitute for being strong," she said.

"No. It is a strength—a great strength. It helps you to keep to the road—the long stony road. That is the important thing in life. Your work, the things you want to accomplish."

"And the view," she asked, "mustn't one look at the view?"

"Yes, and away from it."

"Tell me, Toby, what made you such a good soldier?"

He laughed. "I was frightened all the time," he said. "You would have made a good soldier, Helen. Humanity, imagination and no sentimentalism. That's what's needed. Never to sacrifice what you can't see to what you can see, the rest of the line to your own men. Even though they are your own men."

"Yes," she said, "I see that."

There was a pause.

She wanted to know about the women he had loved, or rather she wanted to know the way he had loved them. He told her about a woman on a liner. He told her about a dancer. He told her how badly he had behaved. He didn't mention Janet. And Helen knew that he was keeping something from her—something out of range of his facile self-abasement—something real.

He knew that he was falling under her spell, yielding to the magic of the hour. He didn't need to see, he could feel her drooping loveliness, her half-tired eagerness, the way her long fingers dangled over the arm of the sofa like a bit of fringe, how she was leaning forward like a half-open flower. And the more he surrendered to the fabric of the evening spun of crystal and mother-of-pearl, of the scent of flowers and the shimmer of her presence, the more real Janet became, like a noise in the next room, heard through a dream.

He could see her sitting on his broken sofa, very much a part of everything, biting her nails and giving the little scornful chuckle that he loved. It would never be to her the Holy of Holies that it was to Helen, because she would feel at home there. Thus did Janet take possession of Helen's room.

Helen was happy because his voice made her happy and because when he didn't talk his silences seemed to her to be ultimate offerings of intimacy. She loved to see him sprawling in absolute bodily relaxation, his arms and legs stretched in an unconscious recognition of their right to be so. Every now and then he would smile at her under half-shut lids and she would feel as if his smile had touched her like a sudden warm sunbeam in the air—a sunbeam lined with a shiver. When she said something her voice was low and chanting as if she were singing him a lullaby.

"Talk to me, Helen," he would say, "I want to hear your voice." And she would tell him about the countryside, the villages and the wild flowers and the names of inns. And though he hardly heard what she said he listened to her while her voice sounded sometimes like pouring water and sometimes like a muffled bell.

Suddenly he got up. "Let us go out into the night," he said.

They walked in silence up to her white rose garden—and, still in silence they sat on a stone seat, his arms around her. She felt as if her body had ceased to exist, she could only feel his arms and his hands and his cheek.

And suddenly, she felt herself dragged to her feet, crushed to him, pulled closer and closer——

"No," she said, "not that——"

Her voice was terrified, she was trying to wrench herself free.

"No, Toby—Please——"

He was bearing down upon her and at every minute her strength of resistance was lessening. And in her low, whispering voice she was trying to explain to him.

"Darling, beloved," she murmured, "don't you see, don't you understand? It is you who don't want it—not really. Just at this moment perhaps because you have lost your head. But I could only give myself to you if you wanted it without losing your head. If you were going to be glad to-morrow morning. Don't you see?" she went on desperately. "Don't you think I want to belong to you, always? My darling, my precious, I am thinking of what you would feel in cold daylight."

She knew that she was not trying to convince him, but to convince herself, she knew that she

was not fighting him, but her own overwhelming love, the tearing longing that could not be stilled because *he* must not have a single regret!

His hold on her was relaxing. She could feel him almost falling away from her. His face had changed, his eyes were blurred, his hot feverish lips looked shapeless. Holding his forehead with his hand, he walked away with his back to her. The tears were streaming down her face. She had won! She, Helen, who would have given not only herself, but her two eyes, every finger of her hands, every tiny bit of her body cut into pieces —she had after all given far more than that. She had preserved his freedom intact for him!

"I must be going home," he said in a thick, husky voice.

They walked down the grass slope together while she felt as if her heart would break. If only she could get away from the unbearable beauty of the night, if she could rip the moon from the sky and the scent of the flowers from the air.

"Helen," he said, "I am sorry." The bitter irony of it! That he should be sorry because he had tried and not because he had failed.

She said nothing. At last they reached the door.

"Thank you, Helen," he said kissing her hand

reverently. He was profoundly grateful and profoundly ashamed.

For a moment she wanted to strike him and then, her bitterness merging into her misery, a new terror struck her. He might go away, right away, early, without telling her. Anything would be bearable compared to that.

"It's all right, Toby," she said quietly. "We will have a talk to-morrow. We can't talk to-night."

She knew that he wouldn't want to talk ever, but in her desperate fear of his not coming back, she could even discipline her voice into a reassuring tonelessness.

"Good-night," she said quickly, and before he had time to answer she slipped back into the house.

"You can put out the lights," she told the footman sharply. She didn't want to catch so much as a glimpse of all of the loveliness she had prepared for him, the flowers she had arranged——

She dragged herself wearily upstairs.

"I might have been his. At this very moment he would have been my lover—nothing could have taken that away from me—nothing."

She drove the words into her wounds like nails, until that blessed exhaustion, which is perhaps our one guardian angel in life, blotted from her consciousness the bitterness of her victory.

CHAPTER XI

TOBY riding over next day to Helen's Court in response to a summons from Helen, went again and again over the circumstances which had led him into his present position. He didn't know which irritated him the more to feel that he had been a passive cork tossed on the waves of Providence or to have to accept full responsibility for the situation which had arisen. A theory of complete free will was essential to his philosophy and yet it seemed absurd to suppose that a man in charge of his destiny would have walked open-eyed into the muddle in which he found himself. Toby was too clear-headed to attribute his successes to himself and his failures to Providence—or possibly it was his arrogance which prevented him from abdicating a second of responsibility. And yet at the present moment he seemed to be implicated in a situation not one element of which he had chosen for himself.

Helen had, he supposed, saved him from the

ultimate consequences of his aberration. And yet had she? He could remember no indignation, no outraged virtue, nothing but a few mumbled words, the meaning of which he hadn't caught. No, nothing in her behaviour had given him any reason to hope for a rupture initiated by her.

And how hard it was to make women see that sexual life was a matter of matches and match boxes. Helen in her shimmering loveliness had not been Helen Horsham, but Helen of Troy, Eve, Joan of Arc—every saint and every cocotte, the women one had longed for, the women one had worshipped, the women one had not had, the women one had bought. In fact—woman. It is difficult to explain the moment when the individual merges into the universal—the great moments, so intense that the whole of human experience is concentrated in one flame of life. Are they moments of realization or of forgetfulness, who knows? He felt that Helen would have understood all of that had she not loved him. With her, further than with any other human being, would he have been able to explore the mysterious tangle of human longing, of weakness gilded with a touch of tenderness, of strength tarnished with a streak of brutality, the mixture of the base and the sublime which nevertheless leaves man created in the image of God. And

their pilgrimage in quest of these hidden revelations had been blocked by one crude unalterable fact—she loved him. The more he considered it the more exasperated he became, as if her love had maliciously and wantonly defrauded him of her understanding.

He rode up to the house in a very black mood indeed. The beauty of the place jangled his nerves. The scent of the flowers and the song of the birds seemed part of a plot to entangle him, a plot which culminated in Helen herself sitting under the cedar tree, her big garden hat tied under her chin with yellow ribbons.

She waited for him to come to her. "I must be calm," she told herself pressing her hands together. She was very pale. There were shadows under her eyes. Some of her loveliness seemed to have been quenched.

He took the chair beside her and smiled. Whether from carelessness or from habit, he allowed it to be a very charming smile indeed. At that she became beautiful again, as if he had lit a lamp inside her.

"You wanted to see me?" he said.

"Of course, always," she murmured. That brought him face to face with the situation. For a moment he had thought that he was going to escape. That the memories of the night before

would evaporate in the drowsy July afternoon, lulled into forgetfulness by the humming of the bumble bees.

"Helen," he said in his most matter-of-fact voice, "I must apologise to you for last night. You did bring it on yourself, you know." It was, he realized, a monstrous way of putting it—rude, caddish almost.

"Yes," she murmured, "I brought it on myself."

He realized with extreme irritation that she was accepting it as a tribute. He made a subtle switch.

"Helen," he said gently, "you are going to be generous and forgive me. I lost my head." He was deliberately hurting her now. He wanted to see how she would take that.

"We all lose our heads sometimes, don't we?" She smiled at him. It was very gallant. He had hit her full in the face but she was not going to show him the quivering pain inside. He loved bravery—well, he should see her brave.

Toby always responded to courage. He gave her a quick glance of admiration.

"Yes," he said, "and you who understand everything understand just how and why one does it. It was good of you to let me come over today. I am very grateful. I think we had better

both of us try and forget last night. If my very deep admiring friendship is of any use to you, it is always yours, you know." It was all very categorical.

"Friendship is a wonderful thing," she said stretching the word to meet her hopes.

"Will you accept mine?" he asked, his voice deferential, his smile winning and appealing. But behind his eyes there was a gleam of determination and his faint insistence was the insistence of a man who wants to do business, for he felt that this contract of friendship would be on her side a tacit repudiation of her love.

"I hope we shall always be friends," she said seriously, giving him an irritating sense that she was parrying his intentions all too skilfully.

"Thank you." He realized that it would be wisest graciously to accept the victory he hadn't won.

Suddenly she laughed.

"Toby, dear," she said, "you are naïf."

He was nettled.

"Give me your arm and we will walk round the garden. It is quite proper I assure you. Grandmama leant—slightly, of course—on quite strange gentlemen."

He was always bewildered when she became gay and mocking. She was young. The sun was

shining. The man that she loved was with her. Suddenly a wave of light-heartedness swept over Helen. After all she had got Toby all to herself. His voice and his laugh were in her ears, his smile was dancing in her eyes, and she could lean —slightly—against him and put one of her hands in his coat pocket and smell the rough tweed of his suit and feel it on her bare arm. Sometimes, even, for a brief exquisite moment she could lay her cheek on his shoulder. And if he didn't respond to these faint passionate caresses, if perhaps he even stiffened ever so little at the contact, how could she be sure of that, on a July afternoon with butterflies in the air and triumphant flowers tumbling over one another in sprawling heaps of colour? Yesterday was a nightmare, shrinking in the sunshine. There was no yesterday—only a to-morrow——

"You will dine with me?" she said to Toby.

"But——"

"Please," her tone was peremptory, not appealing.

"I shall love to," he said.

. . . . . .

That was the beginning of a week when he saw her every day. The greater his determination to extricate himself from the web which was

closing in upon him, the more tightly he seemed to be entangled. She swept him along in her joyous determination to be happy and if at moments he yielded unwillingly to the force of her personality, at other moments he gave himself up to her sheer delightfulness, recapturing once more the fragrance of her charm as he had felt it when he had first met her and finding with ever new enchantment rare and hidden treasures in the recesses of her mind. Those were the times when he was happiest, allowing her revealing touch to waken consciousness and responses which he had never dreamt of. Holding high the torch of her insight she would light up dim corners of his mind, her lucid penetration clearing paths through the tangled undergrowth of his thoughts. Idea after idea came out of its cocoon as she challenged his indolent acceptances and forced him to conquer his own intellectual positions. Only he couldn't keep their relationship clear of her love. Always she was betraying it in little caressing gestures with soft loving looks or half-timid appeals, hungrily begging for crumbs of tenderness. Sometimes when she slipped her hand under his arm, he would gently but deliberately extricate himself, or if she held up her face, he would kiss her forehead with a lightness which seemed to him only too emphatic. Her head, if

she laid it there, found his shoulder hard with a limp arm hanging from it, her lovely fingers would lie unnoticed and uncaptured. Humble and exacting with that blend of humility and exigence peculiar to people in love, she seemed also to have been blessed with the protective blindness of passion. To her all of his coldness was restraint, his aloofness self-control, his rebuffs concessions to his fear of losing his head.

And, of course, there were moments spun out of the moonlight when the desires of the world were gathered into her loveliness and catching her in his arms he felt that he was holding the spirit of life, the stirring pulse of nature asleep in the shut flowers and the sleeping birds and she was a part of the mysteries of the night and of his own youth and strength.

So the days went on with picnics in the woods and long rides in the afternoons. In the evenings he would dine with her and they would sit on the stone seat in her white rose garden drinking in the beauties of the night, or she would come to his cottage in her white lace shawl which had become symbolic of her love, and he would unwind her as he had unwound her that first evening because it was part of the ritual that she loved to observe.

"You are like a child that wants exactly the same story over and over again," he would say.

And she would answer, "Yes, I want it always to be just the same."

Then he would argue. "But you can't keep life still like that as if it were a dog whose ears you were stroking."

"Can't you?" she would murmur with unseeing eyes and he would feel the irritation he always felt when he came up against her mystical faith in life.

"It will jump off the sofa someday," he would tell her vindictively and she would acquiesce with an absolutely indifferent "Perhaps."

He could never make out whether it was fatalism which made her apparently treat her life with so little resistance. When he had first known her he had been struck by her luminous peaceful serenity and now that she was devoured by passion she still seemed without plans or plottings or feverish schemes for juggling with Providence. The better he knew her the less he seemed to understand her, but he realized the immense quiet force of her will against which he had tried in vain to hold out. It was emphatically in spite of him that the present state of affairs existed. And he, Toby, ruthless and hard, who always knew his

own mind and always got his own way, was giving his time and his thoughts, his resistances and his capitulations, to a woman whom he didn't love and who had not even the semi-official claim to his attention of being his mistress!

Toby decided to pray for rain. Failing Cyril's return it was, he felt, the best thing he could hope for, whereupon an ironical Providence sent him a down-pour accompanied by a long delightful afternoon in front of a crackling wood fire in the library at Helen's Court, with Helen showing him wonderful books and talking to him in just the way he had meant her to talk when he had first known her. It had in fact been a particularly delightful day, warm and intimate and easy, stimulating without being tiring with harmonious silences like benedictions.

Only after dinner she had sat on the floor with her head in his lap while he had been irritably determined *not* to stroke her hair and as irritably conscious of not knowing what to do with his *désœuvré* hands.

"Toby," she said, "Cyril is coming to-morrow."

He was glad that her back was turned to him and that she couldn't see the gleam in his eyes. "Oh," was all he found himself able to say rather lamely.

"It has been a lovely week," she murmured in

her chanting voice, "and there will be hundreds of opportunities of our meeting. Besides Cyril isn't jealous. There isn't a touch of dog-in-the manger about Cyril."

"But why in the manger," Toby asked rather irritably.

Helen, however, was following her own line of thought.

"I wonder if Cyril has ever loved anyone," she mused.

"Don't you know?" Toby felt angry with her for being so obtuse.

"No."

"Well, you will find out one of these days," he prophesied vindictively.

"Are you threatening me with a rival?" she laughed gaily.

"No—with a much worse complication than that."

"Do tell me."

"You will discover it for yourself."

"Cyril deserves to fall in love," she said decisively, "he is so delightful."

"You talk about falling in love as if it were a reward when it is really a curse."

"Yes," she agreed, "a curse, but a less great curse than not being in love."

And then, her mood changing, she got up and

sat beside him on the sofa pulling his head on to her breast and kissing his eyelids.

"Toby," she said, "I love you. My darling, my beloved—I have given you everything—more than everything because I have given you everything and nothing——"

Toby, driving home through the rain later in the evening, thanked God that Cyril was coming back next day.

CHAPTER XII

"YOU do look well." Helen had gone to meet Cyril at the station. "Did you have a delightful time?"

"Delightful. And you?"

"I have been here alone except for Toby Ross who would come over and take pity on me."

"Take pity on her"—it was just what Toby never did, she reflected. Why should that particular phrase have leapt to her tongue with its absurdly wide and relevant implications? Conversation is full of pitfalls, moments when a perfectly ordinary *façon de parler* suddenly asserts itself and becomes as full of meaning as a sigh or a kiss, standing out all the more forcefully from having been used with negligent glibness.

Cyril brown and healthy, was looking ten years younger. He was happy to be home, happy to see his wife. For a moment his usual inhibitions left him and pressing her arm a little,

"Darling, it is good to be back." She looked at him wonderingly. His hand had quivered as

he touched her. "How absurd I am," she thought, "because I am in love I imagine that everyone else is. And Cyril of all people, after all these years!"

"Do you remember your story of the woman of fifty, who had been loved by generations of men, being asked how old someone was and answering, *'Cinquante comme tout le monde'?"*

"Of course, I remember it, why?" She realized that she had been thinking out loud.

"Only," she prevaricated quickly, "I thought when you said how glad you were to be back that you were feeling well and had been happy while you were away and caught a lot of salmon. In fact," she tidied up her reasoning, "that everyone is what we are ourselves. My delightfulness is your delightfulness created probably by something not even remotely connected with me, and Helen's Court is the weight of your heaviest fish."

He smiled at her. "I assure you that my happiness is a perfectly orthodox island with none of the sporting isthmuses you are so ungraciously imagining."

"I will write and tell Lady Horsham that your first words on arriving from Scotland were, 'There is no place like home.' "

"Please don't. She might retaliate, 'What is

home without a mother?' and I should be forced to retort in the cynical words of the hymn, 'Peace, perfect peace.' "

"How is Christopher?" she asked.

"He seemed rather depressed. I gathered that you had said *'Dear* Christopher' in a resigned voice, when he came down to London for the day, instead of the 'Oh *Christopher'* which he had counted on."

"Poor Christopher."

"That is much worse, but I will keep your secret."

"What secret? He never thought that I loved him."

"The secret of your commiseration. You can only be sorry for him because he bores you a little. No woman ever pities a man simply because he loves her."

How diabolically penetrating of Cyril to see that something had changed in her relationship to Christopher. Of course she wasn't sorry for him because he loved her or even because she didn't love him. She was sorry for him because she loved someone else.

"Christopher doesn't bore me," she protested.

"Doesn't he? I naturally don't know what has happened, but you clearly pity him for some crime of your own."

"You are always right," she sighed.

"But I am not asking you to confess in what way you have wronged Christopher."

"No."

For a moment she struggled with the impulse to tell him that she loved Toby. What was it that restrained her? Was it that the trembling of his hand when he took her arm had left a subconscious but indelible imprint on a consciousness which had begun to stir in its sleep? Or, was it as she supposed, that a confession was a denial of the brightness of her love as if the sun were to go about explaining that it was shining.

"Helen's Court has a smell of its own, don't you think?" For a brief moment Cyril was giving way absolutely to his love of his home.

"A smell of forgotten lilies."

He smiled.

"Isn't it nice to think that the house may be haunted by the ghosts, not of people but of flowers?"

"That will only be after your death."

She was touched by a certain seriousness in his voice.

"What a legacy! That I shan't have lived in vain."

The muffled, discreet dressing gong sent her to her room.

Her bath was too hot. She let in the cold water, luxuriating in the way it refused to merge into the heat, but flowed underneath it in a cool separate layer. Splashing a little with her hands she could feel rings of hot and cold encircling her limbs. Her nerves were gradually soothed. There is nothing like a purely physical sensation —the nip of frost on your nose, eyelids warmed by the sun, a faint gust of cowslip-laden breeze shaking a hundred intermingling scents out of the spring air.

Dining in the huge dining room with her husband the forces of law and order seemed to have reasserted themselves. The last days appeared to her like some strange delirium, inconsequent and passionate and timeless as a dream. She evoked the little room in which they had had their meals and which perhaps had seen them at their happiest, intimate and sparkling and at ease protected by Jean and William from the yawning abysses of their times alone together. Oh the blessed gifts of a third person! Depths and security and currents of perfect understanding that are turned by a tête-à-tête into pitfalls and uncertainties and jangling misunderstandings.

Helen surrounded by her ordinary life wondered at the past hours when her heart had beaten like a badly played drum and each moment was

as taunt as stretched elastic strained to breaking point.

"Christopher is a beautiful fisherman."

"Yes, of course."

"Why of course?"

"I mean, I have always known it."

"Which is the same as having never known it."

"Yes," she agreed.

"Will you never see Christopher, I wonder?"

"Again?"

"At all. I mean for the first time. It is wretched for him to be like a language you learnt from your nursery-maid, every word of your vocabulary having slipped into your mind unnoticed."

"But I remember learning *'Der Fischer'* and *'Le Loup et l'Agneau.'*"

"Yes, but you learnt them, you didn't discover them."

"I discovered 'To His Coy Mistress' and *'Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam.'*"

"You have never discovered Christopher."

"Christopher *is* delightful."

"Poor Christopher."

"You are saying it now."

"I was only recognizing the justice of your observation."

"I don't know what you want me to do. You don't want me to fall in love with Christopher, do you?"

"Certainly not. Besides that would not be a way of discovering him. That sort of love is invention, not information."

"Is it?"

She was interested, because now it was Toby she was talking about.

"Yes. You create your lovers in your own imagination. You dye them in your fears and your exactions and your hopes."

"And how do they come out?"

"Streaked and bedraggled."

"Oh, *no!*" There was passion in her voice.

"Well, supposing they come out perfect. Surely that is much worse. No one can live their life by someone else's formula of perfection."

"Cyril," she said, "I am getting lost. Which is the right way of being in love then?"

There was a light in his eye. He made a little forward movement towards her. Then he turned away with a shrug. With his back to her as he threw his cigarette into the grate she heard him say in his driest voice:

"It is a case of not mixing. Your passion will not survive the test of your ideals and your ideals will not survive the test of your passion."

"Then how is one to live?" she asked forlornly.

"A frustrated love affair in early youth is perhaps the best solution for the romantic. It gives them an illusion to carry intact through life. Only you mustn't bump into reality. That, by the bye, is admirably avoided by the people who tell you that they are 'loyally abiding by their side of the bargain' which, literally translated, means that they thought they were in love with someone poor and that they know they are married to someone rich." He wondered why he was so savage. He had been so happy when he came home.

"Is that what you think I do?" Helen asked him in a low, unhappy voice.

For a moment he looked concerned, then he began to laugh.

"You? My darling, beloved baby, you have never made a calculation in your life."

He went and stood over her.

"Helen," he said, "stand up."

She obeyed.

"Helen—" he said in a low voice, and taking her in his arms, he kissed her as he had never kissed her before. And she thought rather sadly that every woman is any man's desire—a hot stirring of blood divorced alike from brain and heart, an impulse uncontrolled, an object unchosen—

matches and match boxes, she remembered the Empress Frederick's lady-in-waiting.

She did not feel bitter or indignant, only rather remote and wise. She thought—as Toby had once imagined her thinking—that to be a tiny bit of something elemental and universal, some huge ungoverned force, to be not "a woman" but "woman" was perhaps a bigger, more important function of life than just to be herself. A part is sometimes greater than a whole. But fate was smiling with a very special irony at her, for the wisdom which would have illuminated her relations to Toby was being used on behalf of the man who loved her.—It is difficult to be a husband.

CHAPTER XIII

TOBY, walking down Bond Street felt extremely exhilarated. A town is always rather exciting after weeks of the country, each shop a wonderful unique thing, deserving the most careful concentration. For instance, that orange ostrich feather fan and the tortoise-shell fittings—shame on the cynic who suggests that you will meet them again and again during your pilgrimage down the street; and what about the beautifully symmetrical arrangement of primrose writing paper and emerald quills with here and there fat solid sticks of lovely silver sealing wax? Next door a discreet window of exquisitely unobtrusive men's handkerchiefs shuns a neighbouring riot of spreading silver foxes with soft deep ebony heads, and look at those humming birds flitting about among long coral reefs of orchids! Surely they are unique?

A blasé companion may assure you that Finnigans is followed by Asprey's, that even the most

luxurious luncheon baskets have a certain similarity, whereas the really perfect ostrich feather fans lie tucked away in tissue paper in secret hidden drawers. As for orchids, you should go to Brazil and see them growing—Of course, you know that he is a fool. No corner of Brazil can ever have produced so beautiful a scarlet coral reef ("cymbidian," he murmurs, but you know that he is wrong) and as for luncheon baskets—what two were ever the same?

Toby choosing hats and ties, shirts and handkerchiefs, had not quite made up his mind whether it is more chic to give too much or too little attention to these things. Admitting that effortless perfection is your objective—can it be attained without an effort? Clearly it is important to be particular without being eager, but how is it managed? A faint touch of disdain is born, not made. Toby after all was very young indeed, he knew that too many things oughtn't to match and yet what other guide has one to go by? How useful Helen would have been!

He was annoyed with himself for remembering her. Here he was in London, miles from Helen's Court, free and his own master, with no plans looming ahead like criminal sentences. It would be too foolish to think of Helen. He must avoid looking into flower shops.

The first person he ran into was Count Schröding—the Ambassador, who had the memory of a minor royalty, recognized him at once.

"Mr. Ross," he said, "delightful. Have you seen Lady Horsham lately?"

"I saw her a few days ago."

"I hope she is well? But I need not ask. She is not afflicted with moral diseases, passions or illnesses."

Toby felt a flicker of pride. What would the Ambassador think if he knew that she was consumed with passion for him, Toby?

"I should be delighted if you would lunch with me," continued the Ambassador, "not a party, only a few friends."

Toby accepted with alacrity. The Embassy was large and dark and impersonal, "roomy" the housekeeper called it, with unnecessary footmen at every turn, dressed in liveries covered with cords—half dressing-gown and half hussar uniform. The first drawing room had a dark red carpet, large gilt mirrors and tapestried walls. The floor was so covered with chairs that it was impossible to walk straight and yet they were essentially not designed for purposes of social intercourse, as each was just far enough away from the other to preclude a private conversation. All the numerous little tables were crowded with

photographs over which sprawled Christian names so large that they were at once absolved of any charge of intimacy, while here and there an R. or an I. rubbed in still further their royal character. On two of the tables there were silver vases of mixed carnations and on a third stood a palm with a pink bow tied to it.

Mrs. Blaine, who had found no sofa on which she could "recline," was leaning against the mantelpiece, cool and aloof with half-shut eyes, puffing very slowly at her cigarette as if, failing a better setting, she preferred to be framed in smoke. The Ambassador, the third Secretary, the honorary attaché and the Vice-President of the Pressburg Bank were in consequence all standing in more or less uncomfortable and detached positions.

"Please don't pay any attention to me," she had said, but years of parents and nursery governesses and private schools and public schools and universities and clubs and drawing rooms, of instincts and traditions and habits and self-conciousnesses stood between them and sitting down, so that it was not until Virginia came in and patted the sofa for the Bank Director that anyone relapsed into comparative comfort.

Close on her heels followed Selina, who, seeing her arch enemy Mrs. Blaine, proceeded to make

herself extremely agreeable to the Ambassador asking him whether it was not true that as a young man Bismarck had predicted a great future for him, and when Count Schröding failed to recall any such incident in his youth, assured him that the Russian Ambassador had it direct from his father to whom the great man had originally made the remark.

"What a pity he couldn't have lived to see his prophecy come true," murmured Mrs. Blaine, while the honorary attaché who was deeply religious, mumbled.

"He is seeing it from on high," as if Heaven were a point of vantage from which the Iron Chancellor was gazing at the rather grey and conscientious exploits of his protégé. The further pursuit of this promising topic was stopped however by the entrance of Lydia Hathaway who came in hot and flustered from an altercation with the driver of a dray whom she had attacked for beating his horse.

"The horse," said the Ambassador, "a noble animal." And at that moment luncheon was announced.

"Will you do me the honour, Mrs. Stirling, of sitting opposite me? It is not often that an old bachelor like myself has the pleasure of seeing so charming a *maîtresse de maison* presiding over

my table. If you please, Herr Bank President, ——"

Selina was examining Count Schröding with interest. "May I be impertinent?" she asked. "I do so much want to know why you didn't marry."

The third secretary coughed, remembering stories of the lovely Donna Isabelle M——. The Bank Director was grateful that his own daughters were well-brought-up children who spoke when they were spoken to and then only in the form of acquiescent monosyllables. The Ambassador's eye looked dim. Was he seeing the vision of a woman in white satin hoops, her coal black hair looped with pearls and a gardenia over her left ear? If he was, it gave way with the most irritating rapidity to the picture of a circus rider covered with spangles cracking her whip and flashing her eyes and teeth——

"Why I never married, my dear? Well, I suppose the first reason was a love affair and the last reason is the lack of one. Also you see it was not necessary as my three brothers took wives."

"Necessary, but surely marriage isn't *necessary?*" protested Selina.

"Marriage is the highest ideal for a woman," snapped the Bank President.

"For an unmarried woman," amended Virginia subtly.

"For a married woman," continued the Bank President, "motherhood is the highest ideal."

"Isn't it hard," sighed Lydia, "that a spinster like myself should not be entitled to at least one child without loss of reputation?"

"Society—" began Mrs. Blaine.

"What is there for a childless widow?" Virginia asked the Bank President.

"There is always religion, Madame."

"As a last resort?"

"You are all too young," said the Ambassador, "to remember how religious the world used to be. I recollect it as full of passionate believers and passionate atheists. Tolerance is a diluting force, like water in wine."

"Poor religion," said Mrs. Blaine as if she were talking of a Pekingese, "it has lost the arts and the arts are the soul of the world."

"The soul is spiritual, the arts are æsthetic," the Bank President protested stiffly.

Mrs. Blaine leant forward, gave her antagonist a moment in which to grasp the full beauty of her movement, used her most purring velvety voice and said.

"Don't you think that beauty is spiritual?"

The Bank President examining her slim, almost

pinched loveliness, decided that it was altogether too spiritual for him, but determined to break through these fluffy generalisations.

"There are different sorts of beauty, Madame."

Her voice became softer than ever.

"Do you know," she said awed by the greatness of her own discovery, "I think that beauty and goodness are the same thing." The honorary attaché only half succeeded in hiding a chuckle by blowing his nose.

"People have such nasty minds," continued Mrs. Blaine, this time with some asperity, "a Chopin nocturne, a Shelley poem, a beautiful picture—make me feel *good.*"

"I only feel good when I am ill or unhappy," Selina explained, "and you, Virginia, who really are good, does it come from Chopin or Shelley? —no I suppose in your case it would be Bach."

"Mrs. Stirling's goodness," said the Ambassador, "comes from herself. It is therefore of course combined with beauty."

"My mother," said the third Secretary, "is a good woman, but she is not a beautiful woman."

The thought of the third secretary's mother cast a chill over the conversation.

"There is always beauty in motherhood," said the Bank President.

"I am afraid I am a little bit of a pagan," Mrs.

Blaine boasted amiably, "I believe in the morality of the woods—bluebells under foot and the blue sky over head."

As no one, not even the Bank President, knew what the morality of the woods was, there was a slight pause.

"An outdoor life," said the third Secretary, striving to be agreeable, "is very pleasant."

"The English," said the Bank President, "are fond of the open air even indoors," and by his laughter, informed the rest of the party that he had made a joke.

"Air," Mrs. Blaine remarked judicially, "is what we all need. Let us open the windows of our minds."

"I know some people," Selina looked her enemy straight in the face, "who keep all of their intellectual and emotional doors half open. They have neither the courage of true hospitality, nor of real intimacy and so remain incapable either of banging or of throwing open."

"Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée," said the third Secretary who, though he had not followed Selina's remarks, had studied a little French for his examination.

"Qu' elle ne soit ni ouverte ni fermée," corrected Selina. "Isn't that one of the great rules, Excellency?"

"We diplomats have naturally to make a study of loopholes," agreed the Ambassador, "but I have never yet found a wall without a concealed panel or a cabinet without a secret drawer."

"In other words," Virginia smiled, "a door is only an exit for fools."

"Which simply means," Selina continued, "that a shut door is the same as an open door, to which I quite agree. It was half-open doors I was attacking."

"The East," murmured the Ambassador, "is a corridor of half-open doors. We call them 'concessions.' It is wise to remember that it is sometimes the man who opens the door who is the last to enter the room."

Selina turned to the honorable attaché. "Note that," she told him in an undertone, "for Count Schröding's biography."

"I have often thought," Mrs. Blaine always spoke of her ideas with melancholy deference, "that we all have so much to learn from the East —dignity, calm, peace, true civilization. An injection of the Orient as an antidote to the noise and rush of our modern existence."

"Noise," said the Ambassador, "a terrible curse. Count Moltke, though accustomed to cannons could not bear a rattling window. Lord Beaconsfield on the other hand, would sleep with

twenty-three clocks in his room. He said they kept him company."

"But why a clock?" asked the honorary attaché with a chuckle at which the Bank President stiffly reminded him that he was in the presence of an unmarried girl and Selina looked wickedly at Toby.

"Mr. Ross," she murmured, "you are much more silent than I remember you."

"I am listening."

"Indeed—I didn't know you wrote."

"I don't write."

"I thought perhaps you did. Authors are frequently very stingy conversationally. You know that they are either economizing their own good ideals or stealing yours. Personally, I have always found that if you don't talk, nobody talks to you—mere silence on your part doesn't make anyone indiscreet."

"In other words, one confidence breeds another?"

"And a flow courts an interruption," she laughed.

". . . Bertha, Anna and Marie." The Bank President was describing his family to Virginia, who was, as always, glowing with perfectly genuine sympathy and interest.

". . . an altogether new note in music." Mrs.

Blaine had at last got the Ambassador to herself. ("Poor old scale," Selina muttered maliciously under her breath.)

The quality of the laughter of the honorary attaché and the third Secretary left little doubt as to the character of their joke.

Toby's mind was wandering back to his youth when Ambassadors had been purely legendary figures and all the more real for that——

Count Schröding suddenly felt an overpowering smell of sawdust. "Yes," he said vaguely to the bewildered Mrs. Blaine, "circuses are certainly much rarer than they were."

Virginia was trying not to think of Deauville, which was an altogether unsatisfactory resting place for her thoughts. "Don't lose too much money," had been her parting words to Mathew though it was the last thing in the world that she minded his losing.

The Bank President was deciding to bring his wife a turquoise and pearl bracelet——

Selina was wondering whether or not to make Toby fall in love with her——

The honorary attaché was gnashing his teeth because the Duchess of N—— had not invited him to her ball.

Lydia was reminding herself of the importance of independence. It was the heat, she supposed,

which made her mind wander to lost opportunities and children and the sterility of her uncompromising fastidiousness.

The third Secretary was seriously considering the dot of a newly arrived American who appeared fortunately to be an orphan.

Mrs. Blaine decided that in the 20th century it is very rare and important to be a "lady."

. . . . . .

"So that is the great world."

Toby and Selina were walking away together.

"It is not always as bad as that. Only Anthea Blaine is intolerable. She doesn't even like the things she likes—music or the country."

"Perhaps she likes the things she pretends."

"She likes the pretending."

"Well, that surely is a taste."

"I suppose so," Selina agreed. "I don't know what it is about Embassies, they always seem to produce dreary meals. What with the staff saying *'Monsieur l'Ambassadeur'* all the time and the travelling compatriot who has to be impressed, it is too dreadful."

"Luckily Mrs. Stirling was there."

"Yes, Virginia is altogether delightful. She is Helen's greatest friend, you know."

"I know. They are rather alike."

"Do you *think* so? I don't agree at all. Virginia is so positive and tortured and gusty, like her own enchanting irregular face and Helen is so serene and windless—so—I don't know how to put it—flower-like."

"But she is very eager and responsive to life."

"Yes—imaginatively, not personally, if you see what I mean. Life is a most wonderful journey to her, not a wrack like it is for Virginia."

"But she had a horrible youth, didn't she?"

"That proves it, doesn't it? In spite of living with a disreputable old gambler, being turned out of one pension after another, she remained quite untouched, bringing out all of her faith intact—safeguarded perhaps by a touch of irony, but unspoilt by the least little bit of bitterness. Whereas Virginia, the daughter and the wife of two eminently ordinary and entirely devoted country squires, was bumped about by life long before she met Mathew. After all, we really toss on our own waves."

"I see."

So the whole world thought Helen passionless. The Ambassador with the wisdom of age and the insight of years of experience and Selina with the penetration of her brilliant, undimmed youth, Cyril with his passionate controlled love, and Christopher with his absolute selfless devotion,

Virginia with her tender intimacy and Lady Horsham with her blundering blindness—only he, Toby, cool and hard and indifferent, making an experiment for his own amusement, had lit and fanned this guarded flame until it threatened to become a beacon for all the world to see.

"Every altar is apt to become a bonfire," Toby remarked irrelevantly.

"Which is burnt up, the worshipper or the idol?" Selina asked.

"Both, I suppose."

"That sounds to me almost too tidy. I expect it ends with a half-charred goddess and a crippled hero."

Toby expected so too, but he didn't want to be reminded of it.

They decided to drive down to Roehampton and walk about and sit about and not watch any polo or lawn-tennis. Lord William ostensibly chaperoned them. His life had been far too disreputable to dispense with a stern scaffolding of convention. There is no flexibility about unwritten laws—if life is to be played as a game an iron code has to be observed.

When her father had been suitably disposed of, Selina asked Toby how many times he had been in love. It was a question which he had been accustomed to answer lightly with some figure or other,

varying according to his mood between eight and thirteen, but to-day some curious seriousness seemed to prevent him from answering her in her own tone. The problem of whether or not he knew what love meant had suddenly become tremendously important.

Toby hated to admit that there was any emotion he had not felt, but in common with many people of his age, he found it difficult to combine a dare-devil indifference with the suggestion that he had emerged—bloody but unbowed—from the profounder and more searing psychological experiences. It is so difficult when you are young not to choose all alternatives. Toby felt with a sensitive honesty which was a great tribute to their relationship, that it would be a sacrilege to put his old love for Janet into the fancy dress of a grand passion. In the simplicity of his feeling for her had lain its strength, but for many years now it had slept a dreamless sleep and it was Helen herself who had woken up the memory —a delightful, fresh, smiling, early morning memory it was. But not—no, most emphatically not—a grand passion.

"I don't know," he answered Selina, "it is difficult to set an entrance examination as a basis for our sum."

"How difficult you find it to admit a weakness."

"A weakness? Surely not."

"You are so arrogant that you will only admit lapses of behaviour, never the possibility of having been touched. You wouldn't so terribly mind the accusation of being a cad, but you would most terribly mind the accusation of being a victim."

"Be careful, Miss Cathcart, there are some things that I cannot even allow a charming young lady to say to me."

"Are there?" Her voice was very mocking.

"If I do not continually proclaim the losing of my heart, may it not be that I take love seriously?"

"In fact, that you safeguard your emotions by having affairs without caring in order to insure against feelings?"

"That was not what I meant."

"Does one never get out of one's depth in the shallow end?" she asked.

"No, but one bumps one's head if one dives," he had regained his good humour. Selina's impertinent prettiness, her cool detached insolence intrigued and stimulated him. What effect, he wondered, would love have on this enchanting sprite? Would it turn her into a human being, or would a contact with reality make her even more phantastically different? Just as some people love red hair and others a hoarse voice, so

Toby loved a touch of hardness. He thought that women should be like jewels, not flowers and men like metals, not plants. It was perhaps a part of this tremendous respect for independence. The thought of being beholden to the sun or the rain or a special sort of soil or climate was abhorrent to him. A ruby is a ruby in any hand. Pearls have to be worn, it is true, but it does not much matter by whom.

And so Selina, with her diamond quality, was very attractive to him whereas Helen blossoming at a smile, wilting at a frown, quivering at the faintest caress and, shrinking at the shadow of a rebuff, had defrauded him by ceasing to be the person he had known and admired, and becoming less an individual than an absolute embodiment of response.

That is what love does to us. It takes our personality and dissolves it into the trembling fluid of an emotion so that our every idiosyncrasy is governed and dominated by an alien force which pounds into dust that intricate mechanism of tastes and prejudices, of charms and defects that we used to know as our very own selves. And so providence, ironical as ever, loses for us in our love, the very flavour that made others love us.

Toby amused Selina. She had a very shrewd idea indeed of what he was like—recognizing

even that hard streak of idealism which might, she felt, some day combine with his dominating egotism and make him really achieve something in the world.

"Do you know what I think about your egotism?" she asked. "I think it is subjected to an almost ascetic training so that it should be hard and lean and sympathy-proof."

"I assure you it isn't sympathy-proof."

"Sentiment-proof."

"Sentimentality-proof."

"You call all the things that you can't be bothered to feel sentimentalism. It is so convenient—only what I can't help rather respecting is the unself-indulgent quality of your self-cult. It is too serious a matter to be treated with indolent ease."

He laughed. "Really, Miss Selina, you are almost too severe. Do you imagine that I never think of anyone except myself?"

"I suppose that we all obtrude ourselves sometimes on your conciousness." She wondered what effect falling in love—really falling in love—would have on him. It would be amusing to watch. No, she mustn't try. Her last experiment had been too disastrously successful. The shellfish had come out of his shell, refusing of course to return and the mess had been quite horrible.

Besides, she didn't think that she would be the right person for Toby. It might be good for him to be humiliated, but that would only go such a short part of the way. He didn't need his hardness splintering against hers, he wanted someone who could soften and expand him, mellowing his penetration into a vision, training his brain into a mind. Someone immensely intelligent, but gentle, feminine in all of the most old-fashioned senses of the word—someone whom he would worship with true humility, someone whom he would want to protect.

Suddenly, Selina thought of Helen—she supposed that she had been thinking of her all the time. Of course, Helen would be ideal—lovely and womanly and brilliant, serene and invulnerable, clever enough to fascinate Toby, charming enough to enslave him, gentle enough to soften him, aloof enough to spur him on, kind enough to let him down gently. Helen, unattainable and accessible, warm and sympathetic and patient, but capable of being immensely detached and uncompromising.

"Do you see much of Helen?" Selina asked.

"I have seen a good deal of her lately."

"She is so very unlike anyone else, with her—I don't know how to describe it—her warm invulnerability."

"Yes."

"She is the only person I know who always responds without getting entangled."

"Does she never get entangled?"

"Never. That is where she is so different from Virginia, who always becomes an active part of every mess."

"Why? Surely life is a journey with people getting in and out of your carriage and yet nobody going to exactly the same place, by exactly the same route."

"Not for Virginia. A woman drops a baby on her lap and disappears or someone says, 'Do get out at the next station. I must show you my mongrel and my bachelor's buttons,' and Virginia always gets out."

"What does Helen do?"

Her name slipped out.

"Helen travels with her own wings. She alights and disappears, lighting people on their way, giving them something to look forward to and something to look back on, stirring their imagination, in fact."

"And Virginia?"

The parallel amused him.

"Virginia is always in the grip of some passionate reality."

"What a lot you understand."

"You are laughing at me I suppose. Understanding is such a curious thing. I see through things and Helen sees into them. There is all the difference, you know. Mine is the elementary stage—the short cut that misses the shape."

Toby looked at her with lazy pleasure, enjoying her air of absurd youth, her wide apart eyes, her blunt nose, her shiny straight hair which made her head look as if it had been plastered with honey and the ridiculously deep dimple at the corner of her mouth. Only her long sensitive fingers were a clue to possibilities she would have indignantly denied. She gave Toby a feeling of courage and loyalty and dungeons of reserve.

"Aren't you very young to be so detached?" he asked.

"When should I be detached if not now? Doesn't every day bring me an experience which becomes a memory and a warning and a light on something else, until I shall soon get altogether entangled in a net of modifications and qualifications and allowances, based entirely on lapses and disappointments? If I am hard now it is because my standards are high—I shall lose my severity when I lose my illusions."

Toby pondered that.

"It doesn't work like that with me," he said, "I

go on excommunicating in spite of my own sins." Selina had been led astray. She wanted to talk to him about Helen.

"I suppose," she said a little acidly, "that the lapses are usually women who are too unimportant to count."

"Precisely," he agreed.

Quickly she caught him up.

"And isn't there an ultimate ideal woman to give a flavour to your contempt for our sex?"

"In my imagination or in life?"

"In your imagination."

"There used to be. I dreamt of a woman my fidelity to whom was a reason for all of my other infidelities."

"How convenient!"

"It was."

"Was?"

"Was."

"He is in love," she thought.

"You ought to see a lot of Helen. She should be a consummation of all your dreams."

"Do you think so?"

"She has the thing you love best—an imaginative rather than a personal response to everything."

It was the second time she had said that, he reflected.

"I don't agree with you. I think that Lady Horsham is very personal."

"Oh, but only so superficially so."

He laughed. He couldn't help it. He, Toby, who had been so completely taken in by her air of aloofness, was now being accused of being deceived by her apparent warmth. Helen, whose white flame of passion would bathe the very night in magnesium light.

"Of course, I don't mean that she isn't the best friend in the world," Selina went on, "but in her immense sensitiveness to what you're feeling, she herself hardly seems to play any part."

Toby longed to say, "Don't talk such nonsense. You chit, daring to tell me about the woman who loves me."

Suddenly he began to feel a proprietary sense about Helen. After all he possessed the original and all of these absurd people only saw faded copies painted from memory.

"I don't think we shall ever agree about Lady Horsham," he said, dismissing the topic with his tone.

"In fact, you don't want to talk about her."

"No."

"I love Helen."

"She is a very charming person." His intonation was formal and empty.

Suddenly a light dawned on Selina. "Fool that I am—great, tactless, blundering, clumsy, blind fool. Of course, he's in love with her," she thought.

"Women," she said, changing the subject, "have at least this great merit. They are an intoxicating topic to discuss with men."

"But you like rather a lot of women, don't you?"

"I suppose I do, but I never think I do. I love Helen and Virginia and my cousin, Ann Wendover, and I am tremendously attracted by Lisa Raeburn and Ariadne Amberley. Do you know Ariadne?"

"The wife of the Viceroy?"

"Yes. She was the most enchantingly selfish person in the world, absurdly gifted and criminally lazy. One fine day she married Robert out of love for his love for her. The pedestal he put her on amused her. It fed both her *amour propre* and her irony. Ariadne saw through everything even herself. And now she worships the ground her husband treads on, and spends her whole time trying to show him that she is on her knees. But he can't see it. The only fly in the ointment is her irritation with him for having been so completely taken in by the old Ariadne that he can't see any difference in the new one. Love is so de-individualizing, don't you think?"

"De-individualizing?"

"It is a horrible word. What I mean is—lovers are so indifferent, so unintimate. They don't see the other person because the other person is simply their own passion."

"I see."

Toby was thinking. Selina with her precocious intelligence and her extreme youth was a fascinating creature. Not irritating because she was so natural. And none of her discoveries about life had been blurred and tarnished by personal experiences, the desperate necessity of keeping some illusions and some hopes even at the cost of a guilty secret censorship of thoughts and memories.

"I am going away very soon," Toby said abruptly, with the certainty of someone who has just made up his mind.

"Where to?"

"To Thibet, I think."

"How wonderful," she said enthusiastically, "to get right right away!"

"Before I go, will you do something for me?"

"Of course."

"Will you let me see a good deal of you?"

"Why?"

Her tone was questioning, not provocative.

"Because," he hesitated, wanting to say, "you

are charming," but her absolutely unselfconscious look of interest stopped him. "Because," he smiled, "you are such a wonderful Baedeker to life. All of the stars are in the right places."

"Thank you," she said and a faint pinkness which crept over her face showed him that he had chosen once more, with his usual, unerring touch, the right way to please.

. . . . . .

Virginia was lying on the sofa in her boudoir. The sunblinds were drawn but it was unbearably hot and her head was throbbing. The whole afternoon she had been slumming and she seemed to have brought back all of the heat and the noise, the smells and the dirt with her. The world seemed one large conspiracy of wickedness and futility—all of her friends leading useless, self-indulgent lives and, which was almost worse, not even knowing it. She was unutterably weary. Illness and poverty seemed to have closed in on her from every side, until she felt guilty at being comparatively well and having enough to eat. "If only there were a revolution," she thought, "it might at least salve one's conscience." And then she reproached herself for the cowardice of being prepared for one moment to accept violence as an outlet—violence which is never a solution. "I

am unutterably tired. That is what it is," she thought. She remembered the way the rich talked about strikes and wages and the lazy, self-indulgent lower classes. It made her sick. What was the good of thinking about it? Even people who said very silly things often did very kind ones. Only the East End didn't somehow make kindness seem much of a solution. Something much more drastic was needed—imagination perhaps——

Her back was aching and all of her limbs felt like lead. She pictured the sea at Deauville and Mathew in white flannels smiling into the sun with his eyes wrinkling up. Suddenly she felt herself completely overmastered by her longing for Mathew. What a fool she was not to marry him. What did it matter even if he did stop loving her? That might happen in any case and at any rate she would have his name on the envelopes of her letters—his precious, beloved name —and she would be able to go into his room and see his shoes under the dressing table and little things that he had fingered lying about——

If only he would come now. Now at this very moment——

The door opened and in he came. His light voice touching you like a kiss on the forehead, made his emotions seem rather reflected on it than reflected in it—tenderness would creep over

it like a shadow and laughter like a sunbeam, but the texture of it never changed.

He went up to Virginia, lifted and kissed first one hand and then the other, after which he looked at her for a moment and bending down touched her mouth with his lips. She wanted to call to him like a child in the dark, "Take me in your arms, I am frightened," but instead she said, caressing it with her hand,

"I like to feel your watch chain again."

"Have you missed it?"

"Very much."

There was a pause. Then he said.

"You look tired." His voice was dissatisfied and critical.

"I am a little tired," she murmured apologetically.

"What have you been doing?"

She told him.

"If my capacity for moral indignation weren't practically exhausted, I should be able to tell you what I think about the life you lead. Wearing yourself to the bone in a crusade for preserving the unfit." He was thoroughly out of temper or he would not have spoken so seriously.

"Please don't talk like that, Mathew," she said gently, "think how very lucky we are—having

servants, for instance, to come when we ring for them."

"My dear child, Lowe, who adores you, would rather answer your bell than anything in the world."

"Perhaps he would rather I answered his," Virginia suggested.

"In that case," Mathew snatched his advantage, "the social system would surely not have changed? There would still be servants."

"I am sorry to seem so priggish," she said humbly. "I have been getting obsessed by the silly lives we all lead."

"Which, said by you, means mine and said by me, would mean yours."

"I suppose so."

"How lucky that we have avoided blending them. I owe that almost entirely to you, Virginia, and I recognise how right you have been."

He hadn't meant to say it. Only he had come back full of little, amusing stories to tell her, gay, selfish little stories shot with sunshine and salt and water and light love and heavy gambling, described as only he knew how to describe scenes with cynical vivid detachment. No one could skim the cream off events with so sure a touch as Mathew. And he had found Virginia white and tired, looking ten years

older, with no light in her eyes and no ring in her voice, preaching to him, criticizing the life he led and discussing the social structure.

He hadn't meant to be cruel, but really he must teach her a lesson. Virginia felt as if he had hit her. In a very low, steady voice she said,

"Yes, I think I was right," but through a blur of tears she saw a row of boots under a dressing-table and a watch chain lying on a mantelpiece. And yet she realized with a sort of stab that Mathew didn't care about the poor or the unhappy or the plain. After all, that was probably the real reason why she hadn't married him.

Suddenly she felt him kneeling down by her sofa. His two arms were round her.

"Virginia," he said, "may I be as serious as you are at your worst and I am at my best?"

She nodded, forgiving him, even her old arch enemies, his eternal inverted commas.

"The social system is a nightmare and Deauville a poster, nothing in the world is real except you and you are only real because you are very largely a dream." And then, very low he whispered into her ear, "Virginia, can you keep a secret? I love you."

. . . . . .

The restaurant was a nightmare of light, noise and ugliness.

"Who is that extremely beautiful woman?" asked the Bank President.

"Where? Oh, but that is Mrs. Stirling. You met her at lunch."

"I didn't recognize her," he said.

"Hats," murmured the honorary attaché with originality, "make such a difference."

Selina, Lord William, Lydia and Toby were dining at another table.

"Look at Virginia coming in with Mathew," Selina said, "her happiness is like a banner waving in her eyes."

"Without being a mixed metaphor," Lord William commented, "that is remarkably like one."

"Mathew," asked Virginia, "do you keep your shoes in a cupboard?"

CHAPTER XIV

Helen to Toby

HELEN'S COURT.
Wednesday.

"You left so suddenly and I never saw you to say good-bye. It sounds so silly, doesn't it? What does it mean taking leave of people? If it means anything, it is that you are able to take away a last little bit of a tone or a glance. The knowledge that you are going away puts a dot on some old beloved "i," the prospect of parting makes your mind into hot wax on which a hundred tiny things leave indelible prints.

"Is that why I wanted to see you again? I don't think so—I need no emphasis for my memories. Indeed, they are not memories, but living thoughts, fire at one moment burning into me, and sunshine the next. Probably I shall find a lot of scars some day. But I think I shall glory in them. For they will always be a part of my love. Isn't every ash the monument of a fire?

"I don't know why I am writing to you like that.

"There is sunshine all round me. When you are away my love is perfect and not twisted and distorted by my demands on you. When you are away I am happy. But only because you are away *and* coming back. Every hour is a looking forward. Sometimes I look back too. But then I choose—moments when you laughed and moments when you looked up suddenly.

"God bless you.

"HELEN."

Helen to Toby

HELEN'S COURT.
Thursday.

"I found your riding gloves to-day. They are brown—but, of course, you know that. I gardened in them. They were full of talismanic magic and I felt as if you were holding my hands.

"When I came in Jean said that they belonged to you and that he would return them. I told him I would give them to you when you came back. Afterwards I felt quite tired, as if I had been battling with fate. Isn't the difference between the things that look important and the things that are important ridiculous? All day

long I have been wondering how I can take your gloves down again to-morrow. I can think of no excuse. I might say 'They would do very nicely for gardening,' but how to dispose of their thickness and the fact that they belong to you? Whenever I want a thing very much I become a realist about it which is such a silly habit.

"I did like to feel that you were holding my hands

"Bless you.

"HELEN."

Helen to Toby

Friday.

"We have never talked about that night, have we? I want you to know that I am proud to have been for a moment your desire. I knew that was what I was—not myself at all, but your passion. Of course, I would rather have been both, naturally. Only I don't want you to feel guilty. I am happy to have been submerged in any of your feelings. (Re-reading these sentences they sound strangely formal, which is after all what they are meant to be—a constatation.)

"This is not a love letter, it is an affirmation that when I said that I was giving you everything and nothing it was true.

"Only sometimes the 'nothing' hurts unbearably!

"HELEN."

"P.S. I don't think I have finished this letter. Is it because you don't love me as much as I love you that it seems to me better to be a speck of something big than the whole of something little? I am very tired and I suppose that my philosophy is nothing but a desperate intellectual quest for consolation.

"H."

Selina to Helen

GROSVENOR SQUARE.

"Dearest Helen,

"I am so glad that the season is nearly over. Nothing amusing seems to have happened for such a long time.

"Your friend, Mr. Ross, has been here for a few days. I like him better than I did. Fundamentally, he seems to me subtle and ruthless, which is an amusing combination. Of course, he is madly in love with you. Whenever you are mentioned even casually, he changes the subject. One sees that he naturally couldn't help being. I think knowing you is the one thing he needs.

"Virginia and Mathew walked into the restaurant where we were dining the other night. One positively had to shade one's eyes to look at her, she blazed so with happiness.

"May I come to Helen's Court for a day or two before we go to Scotland?

"Your loving

"SELINA."

Virginia to Helen

SMITH SQUARE.

"I am off to Devonshire for a week with Mathew. He said that he longed for the deep lanes. It is nice to want things suddenly, don't you think? I like the thought of the Atlantic coming from so far—and cider. Of course it doesn't matter a bit really (the Atlantic and the cider, I mean), I should be just as happy if we were going to Tooting, but Mathew wouldn't. That is the root of all our troubles, I suppose.

"They have to be the same thing for happiness, don't they? Devonshire and Tooting, I mean. Or rather Tooting must always be Devonshire. With Mathew, Devonshire is always turning into Tooting.

"What do you think is the matter with me?

Am I a coward? Or, is it that damnable mixture, the realist who can't quite behave as if she had lost her head and the romantic who can never quite feel that she has kept it?

"Helen, I am going to be so happy! 'For a week,' adds the realist, but I can't hear her.

"YOUR LOVING VIRGINIA."

Helen to Selina

HELEN'S COURT.

"Dearest Selina,

"Of course, London must be horrible now with all the flowers dusty. Do come down here, it is so delicious and bits of the garden are blue and white and cool. Cyril will be so enchanted to see you and so will

"Your loving

"HELEN."

"P.S. You silly child, Toby Ross doesn't love me."

Lady Horsham to Helen

CROMER.

"My dear little Helen,

"The air here is wonderfully bracing, but there is curiously little shade. I can't help wonder-

ing if it is good for one to have so much sun in one's eyes, and it really seems to make very little difference which way one faces.

"I have met a most interesting man, a Mr. Gilchrist, a clergyman. He says it is very foolish to quarrel about Biblical texts as our Lord Jesus Christ clearly gave very little importance to them or he would have written the New Testament himself. He says that to be literal is materialistic. I quite see what he means of course, but it is nice to have something to catch hold of. When I asked him if he didn't think that there was something a little bit discouraging about the vague, he said that to be spiritual was not the same thing as being vague. It is rather confusing, don't you think? As you know, I have never been narrow, every forest is as much a church to me as any building, but when people begin explaining that lots of things aren't true I never see where it is to stop.

"I am sure that God never meant us to think about religion. It is much better just to believe. I remember dear Cyril as a little boy saying to me, 'Mother, it is no good reasoning with you.' It seemed to me so touching that he should have realised even then that faith was more important than argument.

"I suppose that that is what Mr. Gilchrist

means. Only he doesn't believe in the Garden of Eden, which seems to me such a pity.

"Your affectionate mother,

"EVELINA HORSHAM."

And so they all went on.

The Bank President bought the turquoise and pearl bracelet and returned to Pressburg.

The honorary attaché was not asked to the Duchess of N——'s ball, but Selina, who didn't want to go, was there and brought Toby with her and they sat on a smutty balcony and talked and talked and talked till her white tulle ball dress was spangled with soot and only four couples were dancing conscientiously round the room, women with split satin shoes and weary feet, men who looked as if their partners were indeed the white man's burden.

Helen sat alone in her rose garden her head throbbing, "Why doesn't he write?" like a tune on a musical box, while Cyril, discussing estimates for the new school house with the Vicar, strained his neck to catch a glimpse of his wife.

Lydia, sitting in her enchanting drawing room, looked at her Waterford glass and her books and her new petit-point fire screen and wondered why they were all so irrelevant.

Lady Horsham, wearing yellow spectacles and

carrying a brown Holland sunshade lined with green, explained to Mr. Gilchrist that Cyril was deeply religious, very much interested in missionary work and passionately found of music.

Virginia, in apple green, lay on a golden beach throwing pebbles into a bright blue sea with a frayed edge of foam.

Mathew, his pale grey eyes paler than ever in the brownness of his face, was wrapping her up with his smile. And even supposing that she had made the effort, her face completely failed to keep the secret that he loved her.

CHAPTER XV

ONE of the gardeners had seen Toby riding through the beechwood. The whole day had become unbearable in consequence. Helen was at the mercy of her own feverish unrest which nothing could still. In miserable restlessness she wandered from one room to another, unable to read or write or concentrate on anything. Her dancing nerves refused to be disciplined. Her attention slid imperceptibly away from every demand made on it, her very movements were no longer under her control. After tea she decided to walk over to Toby's cottage. In the hall she met Cyril.

"May I come with you?" he asked. Smarting, burning tears were massing behind her eyes. With a colossal effort, she recaptured by force her normally, unfailing graciousness.

"Do," she said.

Her smile was one of those victories, which won with our life blood, reach that greatest of consummations, the casual, the ordinary, the un-

perceived. Cyril took her arm with trembling fingers, and then suddenly, in her overwrought condition, the truth struck her like a blinding streak of lightning.

"It can't be true," she said to herself in terror. "It is a nightmare."

They walked through the sun-flecked woods, streamers of light hanging through the branches. The red gold evening seemed to have festooned the dark, tangled shadows. There was an absolute stillness in the air.

"Kaum einen Hauch,
Die Vöglein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur balde
Ruhest Du auch"

murmured Helen.

An infinite weariness had come over her. She hadn't the courage to accept her new discovery. The outside world was so unchanged, so ironically the same. When someone you love has died it is impossible to believe that the traffic is still going on, that shop girls in scarlet feathers are hurrying towards cinemas, while women in turquoise velvet cloaks take one dignified step from their motor to the big glass doors of the restaurant. It is so callous of the world to go on without even a pause, one tiny moment to show you

that it knows that nothing will ever be quite the same again.

Grock is still at the Coliseum (thank God!), old women are selling flowers in Regent Circus (are they daffodils or chrysanthemums? and does it matter?), a man with one leg shows you two love birds on a pencil, the organ grinder's wife is playing a tambourine. "But he is dead," you cry to them and, suddenly, you realise the truth —but only for one brief moment—the world is deaf and you are dumb.

Nothing could have been calmer than that summer's evening. The velvet of the moss prevented their footsteps from sounding, the tree trunks were spattered with lights and shadows, every now and then an indolent bumble bee would lull the silence into a still sleepier rest.

Cyril felt relaxed and happy. The strain of his relationship with his wife had lessened imperceptibly since he had admitted quite frankly to himself that it was a strain. He owed the change to Christopher who had opened his eyes to the fact that one must, after all, seek to tell one's love. A glow came over him at the thought that this lovely creature whom he had worshipped with the fastidious reverence of someone who most passionately repudiated the possibility of "taking advantage," who felt that the very legality of his

rights disenfranchised them forever, was after all a living woman to be wooed—and perhaps—the thought must only be approached on tip-toe—won. During that week in Scotland he had thought things over. His life had been the harbour in which Helen had sought refuge. He was proud and humble that she should have found it there. But perhaps she had wanted more than a harbour and perhaps he had been both too proud and too humble to give it to her. He could remember little gestures that she had made, gestures that he had not responded to out of fear, fear of losing his head and being submerged by his own passion—fear of frightening her and violating the iron code of his love. He had always known that she was not in love with him and because what she offered was not a passionate surrender, but a generous, loving gift, he had received it with what had once seemed chivalry and now looked like selfishness.

Perhaps in his rigorous suppression of his own appetite he had starved her.

Only it was difficult suddenly to change one's manner. He must begin by degrees, gently, so that she should become gradually able to make the demands on him which he hoped would ultimately prove unlimited.

Thinking these things, he pressed her arm to

him and smiling down at her, "Helen," he murmured and her name sheathed in his low, resonant whisper, was a red hot iron on her exposed nerves. She realized desperately that she couldn't bear it for one more moment.

"Cyril," she said, conscious that her voice was far too pleading, "will you leave me to sit on this tree trunk for a little? I feel so dizzy."

"But——"

"No, please. I would rather be alone," and then with a faint, rather tremulous smile, "you aren't hurt, are you?"

He lifted her hand to his lips. Then he raised his hat and walked on.

The little touch of formality caught a tiny bit of her sense of humour.

. . . . . .

But then, like a dizzy person whose eyes try to cling to some definite point, she forced herself to examine everything around her with minute exact care. She looked at the sponge-like green and gold moss and the worn velvet over which they had been walking, she saw a scarlet toadstool flecked with white paint under which a little emerald frog had taken shelter, she watched the red gold evening air steal thief-like through the dark tangled thickets to dissolve into pale sun-

light whenever it reached an open space. And all the time she knew that in a moment she would begin to think and that the very evening itself would splinter into the raging turmoil of her thoughts.

As if to introduce the subject into her mind in an orderly way, as it might be a butler announcing a guest, she said out loud to herself, "Cyril loves me." But, if she expected the bare announcement to force the doors of her attention, she was mistaken. As if her life depended on it, she was watching the little frog leaping about with gay irrelevance and when he had disappeared, her mind wandered to a day years ago when, leaving her father and the landlady in the middle of an altercation which was apparently being decided purely vocally, she had wandered to the little shop in the window of which lay a shiny blue wooden box inlaid with cream and rose-colour. For this box she had yearned with the passionate concentration of childhood, though with the equally unerring fatalism of a child, she had known that it would never belong to her. How she had wanted things in those days—pretty clothes and laces and soft melting furs, gentle voices and welcoming looks and a corner she could call her own—and here she was ten years later, pearls dripping under her dress, Cyril's huge

sapphire engagement ring on her hand, the beauty of Helen's Court behind her, hidden only by the beauty of the beech trees, and yet it seemed happiness would ever be represented by that little wooden box that she had loved and longed for and never even touched.

As her thoughts wandered with a philosophic detachment which was alike the evasion and the solution of her own particular problem, Cyril returned.

"Feeling better?" he asked with that touch of the casual which is often the only real tact.

"Much better," she smiled. Then, because thoughts are less worrying—less real perhaps—when you turn them into words,

"I have been thinking of a little wooden box, blue it was with a cream and rose-coloured pattern. Do you know the sort one finds on the Italian Lakes?"

"I know."

"I wanted it so badly—so very badly. I used to go every day to look at it—a kind of pilgrimage."

"Yes. Every person has their Lourdes."

"Lourdes without cures. The really great faith which doesn't need a miracle."

"Did you ever get your box?"

"No."

"Why didn't you ask your father for it? He would have given it to you."

"Yes, of course, he would have. But even if he had paid for it, it would still have represented some other debt—some unpaid one. I couldn't let my box be that, could I?"

"I suppose not. Not you—you incurable moralist."

"I? I have no moral code at all, in the strict sense."

"I wonder what would break it, your code, your iron code."

They were walking into the sunset. Suddenly, the thoughts that she had been meaning to think overwhelmed her with a surging rush.

Her code? What was her code? Surely it had always been to try not to hurt. Nothing else. No artificial lines of demarcation. No arbitrary inhibitions. An intuitive route without a map, an uncharted voyage without a destination or even a point of departure, guided only by the compass of other people's sensibilities. Wasn't it pure arrogance that had made her suppose that her imagination would be a sufficient guide through life? Reliable and footsure and patient?

Of course it had worked during those years when, with an untouched heart, her sympathy and insight had had free play. It had been easy

to be unselfish when her "self" had been asleep, to be understanding and helpful from the base of her absolute serenity.

And all of the time with her imagination undistorted by personal dilemmas, the cardinal fact of her husband's passion had never once dawned on her! Not until she had fallen in love herself had she considered the possibility that his quiet almost impersonal devotion was, not an inherent coldness, but a triumphant victory of self-control. Even when the first glimmerings of the truth had struck her she had instantly discarded them as the fevered ravings of an inflamed fancy.

The irony of it bit into her like an acid.

And through all of her heart searchings, her bitter self-reproach, her piling up of self-indictments, the question that battered at the back of her head was, "Does Toby care? Will he mind when I give him up?"

Though she shut the door of her thoughts to it, the knocking went on all the same.

Her head really was aching unbearably yet she thanked the physical pains which were, she felt, better than the thoughts which would take their place. On the same principle she went down to dinner feeling that a tête-à-tête with Cyril would be less unbearable than a tête-à-tête with herself with her mind a perpetual charge of incoherent cavalry.

"How tired you look! Do you think it is a little touch of the sun?"

She remembered that Christopher had said that to her. Was nothing ever to be new again, each of the milestones of her life a ghost?

"You oughtn't to have come down."

"Don't you like me to come down?"

The words were automatic, belonging to the long years when, shivering in her serenity, she had made little hungry demands for manifestations of his feelings.

"Like? Don't you know that I want you always?"

His voice was trembling.

As if she were listening to an actress repeating some old remembered part, she heard herself say:

"No, I didn't know."

She felt impotently conscious of some other self playing the wrong rôle in a dream. Each cue was taken with the unconscious precision of habit. Wearily she realized that he was about to put his arm round her and when he did so, she felt neither surprised nor even a sense of his touch. His shining eyes, his nervous vibrating caress were just what she had expected, some well rehearsed bit which never failed to be effective.

"My darling, I have never told you, I have never dared tell you," he was saying, "I thought you knew and that you didn't want to know——"

"Madame la Comtesse est servie."

Jean had broken the spell. It was as if the mould of life had been put down on them again at a moment when strange forces were destroying the shape of their existence.

During dinner they talked about Lady Horsham and Mr. Gilchrist and Selina. When coffee came and the servants left the room they were discussing Mathew and Virginia.

"She doesn't dare plunge into the anonymity of passion," Helen said.

"Must it be anonymous?" Cyril asked gently.

"It mustn't be, but it is. A dissolution, a transfiguration. Anything you like—an apex—sublime —but profoundly, ultimately impersonal."

"It hasn't been like that with me," he said simply.

The pain seemed to be blinding her.

"You have always been you, Helen, a thousand times you."

Dimly, as if she were trying with her hands to ward off a snow storm, she said, "But surely there were moments when I was just an electric current, when becoming your pleasure, I ceased to be myself."

"Dearest," he said smiling, though his voice was grave, "I don't know if you have ever been mine. But I do swear to you by everything I hold sacred—by yourself, in fact—that you have always been you. My very love has hardly dared to touch you for fear of tarnishing you, of mingling with you. I wanted you so badly to be yourself that I never allowed myself to realize how badly I wanted you to be me."

She was crying.

"Helen, I have made you cry."

"No . . . No."

"Dearest, you are so tired and your head is aching and I am saying things to you which mustn't be played in your mind in the rhythm of your pains."

He lifted her out of her chair and half carried her to bed.

"Beloved," he said as he bent down to kiss her good-night, "I haven't made you unhappy, have I? Remember it is always 'Thy will be done'" and leaving the room, he shut the door gently so that no noise should disturb her.

. . . . . .

It was only by waking up that she knew she had been asleep. She felt as if she were emerging from some dark tunnel filled with distorted forms

which were nevertheless familiar—belonging to the every-night world of our dreams where the routine of habits and people is perhaps as fixed and repetitive as our waking life, becoming strange only as the partition between consciousness and unconsciousness gets thinner and thinner and the two spheres invade one another.

As the daylight crept surreptitiously into the room, slinking in behind each protecting shadow, Helen became aware that her thoughts had collected into a heavy weight lying leaden on her mind. Then suddenly she remembered everything. Desperately, as if searching for comfort, her eyes explored the dim corners of the room gradually forming faint shapes into definite objects as if these old familiar things with which she had spent her life would bring it back to her intact. The lovely gilt dressing table service had been given by Marie Antoinette herself to an ancestress of Cyril's. It would go on, as the room went on, belonging to each new mistress of Helen's Court and yet belonging to none but only to the past and to the future, part of the reticent beauty of this house which had given roots to generations of men and hospitality to those lovely, but transient guests, their wives. "None of it is mine," Helen thought. Even the laces and the chiffons of her dressing gown, the satin slippers

lying by her bed seemed to have transferred their allegiance, becoming rather a part of a *décor* than her personal possessions. Yet the problem was not whether it belonged to her, but whether she belonged to it. Her mind wandered as it had so often done to Toby's little room. But to-day it gave her no joy. She wanted to escape this pressure of associations, this eternal borderline between objects and symbols where little ugly things and big beautiful ones tug equally at your heart strings.

She thought the prairie must be rather nice with nothing to catch the eye but the earth rising and sinking, as if nature were taking deep breaths, and vast changes of light unchecked by any foreground. Only, she supposed wearily, there would be too much to remember.

While these thoughts were playing over her mind like shadows, she quietly realized without having consciously considered the matter at all that she must soon walk over to Toby's cottage and say good-bye to him. The matter was so important that it hardly seemed to catch her attention at all. At the moment it was simply too big to fit into her mind. No doubt in time it would find a hundred tiny ways of hurting unbearably—her clothes, for instance, and things they had laughed at together. But just now she

didn't feel anything at all. Only, catching sight of a crystal peacock that Cyril had given her as a surprise, she said gravely, "I belong to you."

Out of doors the milky gold of morning still lay like a drapery over the world waiting to be dispersed by a relentless sun determined to sweep up all the dew—a regular housemaid of a sun. Helen felt as if slowly life were trickling back into her veins till, with a thumping heart and a vain attempt to stem the tide with irony, she realized that in spite of everything her senses were singing, "In twenty minutes I shall be with Toby," "In a quarter of an hour I shall be with Toby," "In ten minutes I shall be with Toby."

"I am going to say good-bye to him," she said to herself, but without being able to give the words any meaning. They glanced off her attention as a tired eye skids over printed words while automatic fingers turn each page at the right moment until suddenly one realizes the necessity of going back miles and miles in order to have the faintest idea what it is all about.

Helen tried to force back her thoughts but they evaded her at every turn, skipping away like truant children broken loose altogether from the moorings of reality. How was it possible in these sun-dappled woods to feel anything but a soaring irrational happiness? Helen's Court appeared

suddenly as a weight that she had thrown off, an anchor which she had lifted.

She remembered how after a long and serious illness, she had lain wearily convalescent, sinking into cushions, buried in lace, shaded by faint rosy lamps, surrounded by scent sprays and white grapes and masses of flowers, tended by a nurse whose apron never rustled and a husband whose voice was never raised, and all the time she had dreamt of snow and thick nailed boots and a blizzard in her face against which she was battling with shining eyes and indomitable, springing footsteps. Ultimately she had reached a wooden chalet which smelt of pines and she had stept on a truss of straw. "I always think that eiderdowns are prisons," she had said to her nurse who had thought her delirious.

This morning it seemed to her that freedom was the only thing that mattered. And yet who is free? Do we not spend our life in a debtor's prison, chained by the love we have received, barred by the gratitude we feel?

Helen remembered with a sigh the admirably narrow terms of reference of her youth. Debts they had had in plenty—in fact they had had very little else—but nice, simple financial ones, the sort that could after all occasionally be paid. Whereas, later there never seemed to be any cur-

rency for your liabilities, nothing you could do except serve your life sentence.

She had ceased to see the woods, her capricious thoughts had come back to her atoning for their wayward gaiety with a fit of deadly concentration.

Her life seemed a conspiracy of gaolers, Cyril's love, her garden, the fact that she had not got children (which ought to have been a simplification but contrarily insisted on appearing as another of her unpaid debts), even the crystal peacock seemed united against her. What had she to oppose to them? Nothing but her overpowering love. "Selfish," she said to herself. "Immoral." Only the adjectives meant nothing, they had, she felt, absolutely no relation with real life. How could one call a flame "selfish" or a flower "immoral?" "There are no adjectives for love," she thought, "it is just inevitable. If it isn't that, it is nothing at all."

At last, for the first time, she was able to think things out: "Six months ago," she said to herself, "I could have left Cyril quite easily, because I didn't know what love meant—neither what his love meant nor what any love meant. Now that I know, I can never leave him." She laughed a little bitterly. "The last chain of all has been forged by you, Toby."

She considered the irony of it. "There is no

such thing as progression," she thought. "There is only a gradual deepening. You move from the shallow end to the deep end. Life after all, is a book without a 'story'—the only plots are in the hearts of the characters. What is action but an escape, a flight from reality?" She was collecting her philosophy, slowly, deliberately, as one takes a coat on an expedition because it will be so cold driving back after sunset.

How very simple her life had seemed six months before. She had had Cyril and her garden, his relations and her friends, all the multitudinous duties which with a magic touch she had turned into pleasures, all of the many interests caught by the far-flung lasso of her imagination. And nothing as it seemed to her now, not one little bit of it had been real. She had never understood how Virginia could be so passion wracked. "Think what you mean to Mathew," she had said, thinking herself how much less she meant to Cyril. "You are his one great romance." She realized now that what Virginia wanted was to be his one great reality. Love purges itself of accessories. And of course Mathew wasn't romantic at all, but—which is the very reverse—fanciful, an unwavering realist, armour plated in whimsies. "He can't understand the drab, it simply has no meaning for him," Virginia had

explained desperately and Helen had thought her a little ungrateful not to enjoy being swept forward in a whirl of light and colour.

"It must be so nice to have someone always arriving," Helen had wanted to give without disloyalty a faint hint of the disadvantages of marriage.

Now she understood the wise smile with which Virginia had refrained from commenting. Of course, when you love there are never any arrivings, only leavings. Each approaching footstep is a warning. That, of course, is the aching hunger of caring, the hunger for reassurances, for permanence. Always there is the bitter knowledge that your beloved is only releasing certain chosen thoughts to you, that agonizing battle against the separateness of existence. Every moment of the day you are left out of something —the loneliness of loving!

Helen had nearly reached Toby's cottage for unconsciously she had been walking very quickly. "This is the last time," she said to herself. It went through her like a spear, but she couldn't keep the pain. It eluded her. She couldn't imprison the realization of what was about to happen, it was forever escaping her. How could she say good-bye to Toby? He was a part of her, marrow of her heart, blood of her thoughts.

She had reached the door, lifted the latch, walked into his room. He was standing up knocking out his pipe into the fire-place. The tears were welling up into her eyes. Without knowing what she was doing, she threw her arms round his neck, burying her face in his cheek.

He pushed her away, firmly and not very gently.

"Helen," he said, "anyone might come in at any moment. Have you absolutely no respect for your reputation?"

She stood there, half dazed.

"Yes," she repeated, "someone might come in."

Her voice sounded normal to him, but to her it was a strange noise, coming out of a far distance.

"You never seem to consider what other people may think," he went on a little irritably.

"It doesn't matter, does it?" her voice went on functioning automatically.

"Of course it matters." His annoyance was increasing and making it easier for him "to have it out," as he put it to himself. "You don't want people to talk, do you? We have really given the servants every opportunity to gossip as it is."

For a moment she was staring out of this nightmare back into life.

"So you don't like to have our names linked?

Isn't that what they would call it in a magazine story?"

"I don't read magazines. And I wasn't thinking of myself only, but of your husband." ("Fool," he said to himself, "I ought to have said I was thinking only of her.")

"Cyril," with a glow of comfort and gratitude, she realized that she had Cyril in her life. "Cyril is the one person who never needs protecting against ugliness and vulgarity—it glances off him."

Toby flushed. "Well, no man likes his wife being talked about with another man."

Helen felt unutterably weary. She didn't seem able to extricate any reality from the conversation. She was too frozen even to be scarred by the, to her incredible, angle which he had introduced. Everything Toby said was undeniable and yet altogether remote and irrelevant with nothing whatsoever to do with what she had come to say.

She knew that he was trampling on a thousand precious, delicate things and that soon the numbness which had invaded her would give way to the unbearable aching of her bruised and crushed spirit. But for the moment she felt nothing, only in the grey cold twilight of her thoughts an idea came to her.

"Toby," she said, "do you love me?"

" . . . . No."

"Have you ever loved me?"

" . . . . No."

"I see." The tone of her voice and the look in her eyes were grey and unwavering.

"I don't think you do. No one knows better than I do how wonderful you are."

"No one has had better opportunities of discovering."

Her voice was a ridge of ice.

"You don't need me to tell you about yourself. Everyone does it. I am not blind to your magic. Only I happen never to have been in love with you. I may have lost my head, but it was always a loss of my head, never something I wanted to have done. What I wanted was your friendship —I longed for it. I thought that we could have had the most wonderful intimacy in the world. You wrecked that by wanting something different, something I could never give you."

"Why didn't you tell me?" It was a little cry, life was returning to her in a flood of pain.

"I thought I had made it so very clear. Anyone who wasn't blinded would have realised."

Again she said, "I see."

"Helen, it has been such a pity, such a horrible waste and now I am hurting you."

"You are very weak," she said dispassionately.

"You were very strong, Helen, and very, very charming."

"Don't," her voice was sharp for the first time. She couldn't let him belittle things, insult her by doctoring her humiliation.

There was a pause.

With a superhuman effort, she had found a smile.

"Poor Toby," she said, "how difficult it must have been."

"I knew you would understand," he agreed gratefully, levying in common with the rest of his sex blackmail on feminine insight.

Helen was sitting still on her chair, not daring to get up until she was quite sure of her legs. Nothing in the world, she felt, would be as dreadful as to faint. Trusting to an unshed screen of tears to blur the all too poignant features of this room, she nevertheless noticed a gap on the wall.

"Where is the Prince Consort?" she asked.

"Mary Ann gave him away as a wedding present to her niece."

Helen felt a little glow of comfort. "I am glad," she said.

There seemed to be something that Toby

wanted to say to her. She couldn't imagine what it could be. He seemed to have been saying such very difficult things so very easily.

"Helen," he blurted out, "I am going to Thibet."

"How wonderful!" With a rush of misery she remembered their walk through the woods and the *Helena Mirabunda,* the orchid he was going to find for her. She supposed that a deal of her time now would be spent remembering——

"Helen, I shall be gone a long time. Don't think of me as too much of a cad. Perhaps when I come back we shall find our friendship after all."

"Perhaps," she said gently in the tone of a mother humouring a child.

"Helen, please say you're not sorry it all happened."

"I am not sorry."

She looked round the room.

"I have been very happy here," she said.

He was feeling miserable, ashamed and wretched.

"I must be going."

"Not yet," he pleaded, "not just yet. Stay to lunch."

"I can't do that."

"Let me walk you home."

"No," she said, "I would rather not."

"Helen," he was urgent, "don't you like being with me any more?"

It was incredible, absolutely incredible, she thought, that even at this moment he should wrench a tribute from her tortured heart.

But out of the bigness of her love, she could give even to his vanity.

"I am always gladder to be with you than not."

Then she got up.

"It is never any good dwelling on good-byes," she said, "it is not the being together that it prolongs, it is the parting."

He had taken her hand. His touch hurt her unreasonably.

"Good-bye, Toby. God bless you."

"And you," he said.

He watched her walk away into the sun with slow deliberate steps. Then he saw Mary Ann run after her with a bunch of moss roses. Helen was stooping towards her, but she never turned round. She seemed to Toby to be holding the flowers very tight.

"God, what a brave woman!" he said to himself, and then, "Being frank is ever so much easier than one would think."

Helen, clutching her moss roses like a drowning

woman, clinging to a bit of wreckage, sent up a silent prayer, "Pray God don't let me think."

Then, suddenly she laughed.

"I never told Toby that I had come to say good-bye," she murmured.

CHAPTER XVI

HOW does one get hold of one's pride and force it into action, Helen wondered. She realized at last why people were touchy. It was, of course, in order to put a barrier of *amour propre* between you and your heart. Being offended after all cannot hurt as much as being hurt.

Her own position was quite simple. She had been deeply humiliated, therefore, she must be feeling angry, bitter and indignant. Actually she found herself thinking, "Why didn't I let him walk home with me? Oh, if I could only see him again—just once. If I could hear his voice——"

It was for this reason that she was making appeals to her pride to come to her rescue. But it insisted on behaving in a subtle analytical way which brought her no comfort at all. It is impossible to be angry to order—to your own order.

She thought over the last three months, looking at them entirely from Toby's point of view. It was here that the subtle behaviour of her pride

after all did her a service. It realized how far more deeply it was implicated in a defense of Toby than in an attack on him. Her self-respect could find no relief in anger, but only in the employment of every imaginative resource she possessed for the vindication of her lover. Unless she was to feel bruised and crushed and dishonoured she must prove to herself that all the wrongs had been on her side. If her love was to have any meaning left to it, Toby must be justified.

And so, searching passionately for favourable data, doctoring her memory, arraying her arguments with the unconscious partisanship of desperation, she proved to herself that she had been blind and exacting, un-understanding, tyrannical and insensitive. Toby's weakness in the beginning became the exquisite sensibility of a Don Quixote (he hadn't wanted to hurt her), his ruthlessness at the end was the difficult courage of a hero (he had been determined to spare her ultimate unhappiness).

Thus, with the passion of all her faiths, her faith in life, her faith in human nature, her faith in love, was she able to reach the utter point of self-abasement necessary to secure the acquittal of her love. And so she could hold her head high and say, "I, only I, was to blame."

There were, of course, unbearable moments.

Bits of the garden would insist on keeping open the wounds of her memory—so did bits of the house. The sofa in her boudoir, the Sung vase, the little Spanish carpet, seemed determined to abdicate the rôles of objective joys in order to become subjective tortures. She ought never to have let Toby come inside Helen's Court. "Prisons can't really be prisons," she reflected, "cells after all are bare—empty of associations."

She wired for Selina. She didn't want to be alone with Cyril. Loving too much may be a crime against the other person, but loving too little is a crime against yourself—and both are punishments. Is not every crime a punishment as soon as you realize that it is a crime?"

Selina arrived, very cool and very charming. She wanted, she said, to see the Baldwins. Toby had told her about them. Helen had not foreseen the Baldwins. She wished she hadn't invited Selina. But in the country, there are no excuses. They drove out together in a victoria.

"Where is Toby's cottage?" Selina asked.

"In the middle of the wood."

"Like a Hans Andersen?"

"Not very like a Hans Andersen. Altogether Victorian. Arnold Bennett could describe it."

Helen blushed at her own dishonesty. Could Shakespeare describe it? Or Schubert?

"Toby didn't know, I suppose."

"Know what?"

"Know what his cottage was like."

"He hadn't the faintest idea."

Selina wondered why Helen should be so vehement. It was, she supposed, her hatred of ugliness.

"He isn't there now," Helen added.

"Isn't he? But I must see it."

"Ned Baldwin will show it you."

"Is there a picture of the Prince Consort?"

"It has been moved." Helen spoke sharply.

"Congratulate me on my brilliant guess. I saw visions of Prince Albert deerstalking in a top hat. But then, I suppose that Toby saw no meaning in it at all—one way or the other. He isn't civilized enough."

"No."

Why do other people rob you with their understanding, stealing your discoveries and your guesses, invading the special domains of your insight?

Overton had not changed. The pink begonias were still there and the shiny high-church woodwork. Mrs. Baldwin explained to Selina that all men were boys and she added, "Boys will be boys!" Why Mr. Baldwin, himself—but Miss Cathcart wasn't married—not that she, Mrs.

Baldwin, wasn't broad-minded, she felt that everyone ought to see a bit of life. Ned was sowing his wild oats. "Poetry," she whispered, filling the word with night-club implications.

Helen asked Mr. Baldwin if he liked Overton. Mr. Baldwin said that Mrs. Baldwin liked it very much indeed. She found the neighbourhood very select. The word clearly meant so little to him that he was able to endow it with the irrelevance it deserved.

"But you?" Helen insisted.

Places, Mr. Baldwin explained, were all much the same to him, he couldn't kind of see any difference. Not but what Overton was very pretty, very pretty indeed.

But why didn't places make any difference to him, Helen persisted. He seemed puzzled. Then, nervously, because the lady really seemed to want to know—conversation had never appeared to him as a line of communication—he mumbled that one always kind of remained oneself wherever one was—just the same, in spite of all the moving.

Helen was silent for a moment.

"How do you manage it?" she asked, "staying the same?"

"I can't help it," he answered apologetically.

Then Ned came and brought with him the memory of that perfect hour when the sunrise of her

happiness had gilded each moment with the rays of looking forward. She didn't want him to see her now with her vision dimmed and dulled and her heart deadened to the echoing calls of life.

"You," he stammered in his delight.

"You never brought me your poems," she said, sentencing herself to the misery of the moment when he would arrive, ostensibly carrying a sheaf of manuscripts but actually bringing a bundle of memories, a yellow lamp, three china cupids and the smile with which Toby watched her "being charming."

How had she ever been anything else in those days when each minute had been quick with anticipation, every hour festooned with garlands of delight?

"Helen, have you seen these?"

Helen braced herself. Her unseeing eyes skimmed the album and yet in spite of her iron resolve whenever her eyes reached a photograph of Toby, they fell into it as if it were a hole. At last, they reached the bazaar. Helen saw herself eager and indifferent, happy and detached, while Toby stood holding her bouquet ("They were yellow roses," she said to Selina) in one hand and a black satin cushion in the other—and his smile was saying, "Divine humbug that you are, how much of a humbug are you?"

"And he found out to his cost that I wasn't one at all," she reflected with a touch of irony. Only she couldn't disinfect her misery with bitterness—for, after all, she was thinking of the dead. Dead joys, dead dreams, nothing to look forward to—only her unkilled love living in a grave.

"Mrs. Baldwin is rather dreadful," Selina said as they drove away, "but he looks rather nice. Toby can't have got much from them except the possibility of indulging his tastes."

Selina realized that Helen did not want to talk about Toby.

"Darling, I won't mention him again. Of course he left here because he loves you."

"He never loved me."

He probably tried to kiss her, Selina reflected, and she is so accustomed to adoration that she thinks any manifestation of passion incompatible with real love.

They talked about other things. Virginia was still in Cornwall. She had written to say that she knew her great mistake in life was to try and turn islands into peninsulas. In future she was going to avert her eyes from the very sight of an isthmus.

Helen felt a stab of envy. How ridiculous of Virginia not to be happy. You don't want your lover to fall into your life like a coin into a money-

box, to sing a song of yearning from his cage. Better far that he should inhabit the woods, coming when the mood takes him to bring his freedom into the circle of your arms.

She smiled a little ironically at herself. Of course, having nothing, she would be glad of a little, a very, very little, but if she had something, would she not want everything, if Toby cared for her would she not feel, as Virginia felt, that her heart was no cage, but a limitless space of enchanted seas and forests, suns and moons, mountains and plains.

And so, the problem remains. However much your love may seem to you a widening and deepening of freedom, a breaking down of barriers, a shaking off of fetters—to the other person it will almost always be a nailing down, a shutting in, a circumscribing of life.

And so you say, "I am opening everything to you, everything. I am opening my heart," and the answer comes, "I know a trap when I see one."

"Well, was Selina's curiosity rewarded?" Cyril was helping them out of the victoria.

"I was trying to trace Toby Ross," she explained, "but I lost him like one loses a Roman road."

"Mr. Belloc doesn't," Helen retorted, "he takes

you up to a fox glove and a railway line and says, 'Here it is'."

"Well, I suppose I am not a real expert. I found the begonias entirely misleading."

"And the Baldwins? Or were they a part of the begonias?"

"No, I don't think so. Not a part of anything. Mrs. Baldwin was very hot and said that 'boys would be boys,' including her husband in the category, but more I think from dramatic sense than accuracy. Ned, the son, seemed disintegrated by love for Helen and Mr. Baldwin— What did you talk to Mr. Baldwin about, Helen?"

"He is so nice. He said that moving made no difference to him. Houses and places, I mean. He always—he apologized for it—seemed to be the same."

"Well?"

Selina wasn't sure whether Cyril's question was a comment on the inadequacy of Mr. Baldwin's conversational gifts or a desire to extract from Helen some significance of which she clearly was alone conscious.

"He didn't say anything else. Only he is so detached. He doesn't get imprisoned in things."

"Helen is almost like a tortoise, carrying her house on her back. Helen's Court belongs to her so," Selina said.

"Oh no," Helen's voice was curiously weary. "I belong to it. I wasn't born here. I am just a guest—a guest caught for life." It came on her again as it had the morning before that she had been caught in this trap of beauty and tradition and leisurely intangible things—invisible, unbreakable chains, suddenly made heavy by Cyril's love.

Again she said to herself, Are there any punishments in life but our joys turned against us?

"Only a guest," Cyril was saying, "in the sense that the spirit in one's body is a guest—life itself, in fact."

Selina was surprised. This almost passionate note from Cyril? Cyril whose whole life was one long fastidious repudiation of enthusiasm.

"Thank you," Helen touched his arm with her hand. Then she blushed hotly, ashamed, humiliated at herself for receiving this glorious gift of love with a light graciousness, which in its painful inadequacy was nevertheless an effort of her iron will. With deep humility, from the bottom of her heart, she prayed for forgiveness, asking God to grant her some power to do something for Cyril.

Do something? What could she do? Duty, sacrifice? What sort of gifts are those? How could she insult the love that she had known, the

love that she was being given, by counterfeiting its language? Sweetness, unselfishness, to be a good and virtuous wife, what substitutes are those to offer to a man who has given you his heart?

Never for a moment did the fact that she had given up her lover, strike her as noble or heroic, any more than the fact of falling in love had appeared to her as immoral or a crime. Before she knew that Cyril loved her, it had seemed quite simple that she should love someone else. As soon as she had discovered that he cared, giving up Toby had appeared to her not as necessary, but as inevitable.

"One must not hurt people." On that single line she had tried to run her life.

Had she been such a failure? Hadn't she managed, for the moment, at least, to concentrate all suffering on herself?

Oh! her love had brought with it a terrible punishment, not only the aching void of her longing for Toby, but the hourly consciousness of all that she was withholding, measured with a red hot exactness by all that she had learnt about giving.

"Christopher is coming down in time for dinner," Cyril said. Some exquisite scruple of delicacy prevented him from looking up. He wished to preserve the privacy of any emotion that sur-

prise might have forced, for one revealing second, into the open of her eyes. In his new attitude towards his wife of trying to show her, gently and by degrees, some of the things he felt, there was no room for his old dry dissections of her moods. Where once he would have appraised her with an examining smile, he now protected her with an averted glance. It was as if the taking off of his own armour had compelled him more than ever to shelter her.

But Helen was only feeling an added weariness. Christopher appeared to her as another shut door, another shut window. Perhaps after all she was never going to breathe the air again, to feel the frontierless expanse of Toby's little room made limitless by her love. Cyril, Christopher, Helen's Court, her garden, personal relations, beauty—they all appeared to her as so many gaolers locking her away from life. There were no hardships and no struggles, no physical pains to deaden her mental torture, no work or battle to give her the sense that she was alive. All around her nothing but love and loveliness, friendship and devotion, books and music, leisure and sympathy, flowers and the possibility of helping people a little, and round it all a high wall which she had once scaled breathing the new air, stretching her eyes into the distance over wind-swept plains

and bumping her willing head into reality. How could she go on for years and years with nothing but cushions to plunge into?

"Dear Christopher," she said, "we must go up and dress. Selina come with me, I have a present for you——"

. . . . . .

So Christopher knew. What her love for Toby had told her about Cyril, his love for her had told him about Toby.

"It is as if," she explained, "I had suddenly learnt everything at the same moment. How to see and hear and talk and taste and smell. And that I had discovered them all too late when I no longer needed them."

"Don't say that, Helen, it hurts."

"I'm sorry," she murmured penitently, not only for what she had said, but for not having wanted to see him. In return for her selfish longing not to be reminded too much or too variously of her life, he had brought her his beautiful understanding, the absolute and disinterested quality of his love for her which made it seem more of a dedication than a devotion. He sat silent, aching at the lost brightness in her eyes, remembering the pulsing throb of excitement, the straining rhythm of joy that he had felt last time he was with her,

comparing them to her now, pale and extinguished, the amber and coral blotted out of her, leaving a dim pencilled effect of faded white and shadow.

Best of all, he loved her as she was to-day, reminding him, as she did, of that faint evening hour when dusk, like a loving nurse, creeps silently forward, turning out each flower.

"But perhaps I am selfish," he thought, "perhaps I simply love her best like this because when she is happy I feel her being swept away from me by alien joys. And now, at any rate, I can do something for her, even if it is only to be silent."

"By the way," Helen's voice was quite toneless and she was looking at the moss at her feet, "did I tell you that he didn't care for me?"

Christopher flushed and she wished, for his sake, that she hadn't told him.

"When I discovered about Cyril," she went on, "I knew I must give him up. But he did it first. It was really much simpler like that."

Christopher's eyes were flashing. "Good God, do you mean he thinks that he——"

"Yes," she smiled a little. "It was much better, don't you think? You see, incredible though it may seem, however vain one is, there are some situations in life which are out of range of one's vanity. I didn't want to appear like someone who

is making a big sacrifice—I didn't feel like that. I was simply paying for my own blindness. When your sight is suddenly recovered, you don't go on groping, that is all. It is not a matter of heroics at all. Besides, if Toby had known I was going to give him up, he might have tried to keep me. And it wouldn't have been love."

All unconsciously, she was giving her lover away, showing him to Christopher in his love of power, of getting his own way. Christopher shivered. Helen, of all people, in the clutches of a ruthless insensitive egoist.

As if in answer to his thoughts, she said, "Toby was very subtle, you know. He understood everything." Then she put her hand on his arm, "Christopher, thank you for not saying the things you think about him. Remember that I—love him."

A look of pain crossed his face. "I am not likely to forget." Then, passionately, "Helen, I have no right to ask—and you would say that it didn't matter or make any difference—but I must know—I don't mean that—of course, there's no 'must'—but I beg you to tell me. Was he your lover?"

She smiled at him.

"No," she said and seeing the relief—it was almost happiness—in his face, she wondered at

the values of men who can think the gift of your body so much more important than the gift of your heart. What a strange, mysterious mistaking of the lesser for the greater.

"And Cyril has never guessed anything?"

"Nothing."

"How blind love makes people."

"It taught me how to see."

"What are you going to do?"

"Give Cyril everything—everything in the world except what he most wants and what I most want to give him. And every day his love will come out, more and more, getting freer and happier and more unfettered. And I—Well, I shall spend my time responding."

Christopher shuddered.

"Come," she said more lightly, "what other programme is there?"

"Good God, it is a nightmare. You can only pray to love him."

"Yes," she remarked drily, "I can always do that."

. . . . . .

Helen and Selina had left the dining room. The men were sipping their port.

"Christopher," Cyril spoke a little shyly. "I want to thank you. I've been wanting to for

some time. You remember what you said last time you were here about showing things more? And afterwards, in Scotland? Well, it doesn't come very naturally to me, as you know. But I've been trying lately. And," he laughed almost boyishly, "it gets easier every day. I don't know why, but I've always had a curious inhibition. Trying to make one's wife love one seemed a sort of taking advantage—there were altogether too many opportunities. But now," there was a very gentle expression indeed in his eyes, "I know that you are right."

CHAPTER XVII

TOBY was waiting for Lord William and Selina—they were going to see a play. He was enjoying himself in London with an agreeable sense of a load having been lifted off his mind. The last time that he had been there it had only seemed a kind of interval. His relationship with Helen had hung over him like an indeterminate sentence and each morning her letters had arrived to remind him and upset him. Wonderful letters they had been, he reflected. He would be able to enjoy re-reading them. They were certainly the best love-letters he had ever received, fed alike by her gifts of expression and her complete absence of caution. Prying eyes, eavesdropping ears, the leering, winking side of life, how curiously ignorant of it she was. Ignorant or ignoring? He didn't know. There were certain avenues which her penetration never seemed to explore. He wondered how her Pension youth fitted into her consciousness. It was

amusing to think about her, to speculate and remember, now that it was all over. The end after all had come so easily. No tears, no protestations, no reproaches. Never before had he extricated himself so comfortably. Helen deserved the greatest credit. She really was very superior to most women. He tried to remember what she had said, but the whole interview seemed in an odd way to escape him. In spite of his good memory it eluded him. He himself had been unnecessarily categorical. It was always such a mistake to go into things. One was apt to get carried away by one's case. She had said, "I see," and that she was always glad to be with him. He really couldn't recall anything else. And she had agreed that they would be great friends some day and had given him her blessings. The whole affair had probably been a sort of flare-up of her temperament. When he came back he would find their intimacy again. That would be delightful. One can't after all become unintimate——

"Helen!"

The cry escaped him as the door opened. Then he saw that it was Selina.

"You recognized Helen's lace shawl. She gave it to me."

"When?" he asked a little sharply.

"The day before yesterday when I was down

in the country. She said, 'Selina, I have got a present for you.' I didn't know how to thank her, it's so lovely. 'I've no use for it,' she explained, and when I protested that one always had use for beautiful things, she shook her head very sadly and said, 'Not always'."

Toby felt absurdly upset. Then he pulled himself together. With his most flattering smile he caught her in a web of implications.

"Will you do something for me?"

"Probably."

"Will you go and get another wrap?"

Her whole expression softened.

"Toby dear," she said, touching him with a little light caressing gesture. "You can trust me, I understand."

He was surprised and disconcerted. What did she think she understood?

"I did him an injustice," thought Selina, going up to her bedroom.

"I imagined him hard and a little callous but I was wrong. Of course he worships the ground she treads on. It must have hurt him almost physically to see me in her shawl. A little alien emerging from the wrappings of his beloved."

In the evening she was very gentle to him. Lord William asked her twice if she were feeling well.

Toby wondered at her manner and solved the problem altogether too simply.

"After all," he thought, "it is a good thing that I am going away. One mustn't get tied up too young."

. . . . . .

Virginia sat in front of a log fire, her hands unfurled to the warmth. Really everything was perfect—blue and white pottery, pewter, oak beams, tankards of cider, butter as yellow as a marsh marigold. Only to-night she could feel Mathew lighting his match and throwing it away, knocking out his pipe and forgetting to refill it, picking things up and putting them down again. There was restlessness in the air.

"Virginia, I love your hands when they are brown. Long, sensitive *café au lait* fingers."

Her face was lit by his praises.

"Soon they will become white and idle and luxurious again — commonplace aristocratic hands."

"Since when?" she teased, "have you become tired of idle, luxurious things?"

"Since they ceased to provide any contrasts."

Contrasts? She felt as if she had laid a trap and fallen into it. Variety was after all the breath of his nostrils. Never for a moment did he feel

that longing for a merging, an abdication, that craving for continuity which never left her.

"Until I saw them tan," he went on, "plunged into that fictitious sheath of health, I never knew what they were like."

"Even the sun has given you inverted commas," she said, cursing her own folly.

"Inverted commas?" he ruminated. "The sign-posts of the mind."

Virginia was miserable. She had succumbed to the temptation of a foolish gibe. And now he was being carried away from her on the Pegasus of the particular irritation that she alone could evoke in him.

For is it not the same pressure that forces open the very underworld of your thoughts which drags you apart and separates you with that ultimate separateness of intimacy?

Virginia felt that all peace had left the room. In an attempt to regain it artificially, she sat very still and when she spoke her voice was low as if she were singing a lullaby to her own nerves.

Then, desperately, she made the effort which she had so often—with equal desperation—made before.

"It has been a perfect time."

A little chillily he recognized in her past tense an attempted rescue of his graciousness.

"When must you leave?"

"To-morrow, I think."

"I expect you are right," he said. "I have felt all day that it was going to rain to-morrow."

He opened the door for her.

Why did she torture herself to keep his freedom inviolate? Why did she go on sacrificing everything to a virginity of liberty which—as she knew from bitter experience—would ever remain absolute?

"Let us go out for a minute," he said.

The wind was rising, chasing the moon across the sky. The sea was dark and angry, a battle ground of hostile currents. Suddenly he took her in his arms with a hard, fierce passion.

Her taut nerves snapped and she burst into tears.

He let her go, dissatisfied.

Laughing through her sobs she taunted him. "You can't bear to see a woman cry, can you?"

"No," he said, "but my prejudice is probably due to some old-fashioned æsthetic cliché. After all, why should red eyes only be admired in white rabbits?"

She felt flustrated. The whole evening had been her fault. She had wrecked it again and again.

On the table in her bedroom a single candle

flickered. Next to it was a bunch of Sweet William in a tumbler.

Mathew knocked and walked in.

"I love your hair," he said. "It is like a dirty penny." And then, "By the way, it may be sunny to-morrow."

The sun had already risen in her eyes.

"It may," she said.

He lifted up her hands one by one and kissed them.

"I mayn't say that they are brown, may I?"

And then from the door he asserted firmly, "Brown—a nice wholesome colour."

. . . . . .

It was late October—the hedges crimson and gilt, scarlet berries and green gold leaves. Here and there the trees would burst into a furnace, the flames arrested only by an occasional black-green fir. The whole earth, especially the ploughed fields, was covered with a rosy bloom. Helen walked through the rust and copper of her beech wood, each leaf made of some gleaming metal—lit by red gold shafts of sunlight. She was grateful to the riotous blaze of colour which had obliterated the countryside, drowning every trace of pale transparent green leaves, of pale dissolving primrose sunshine, helping her to forget.

She loved the Autumn—except for chrysanthe-

mums, surely the most unflowery of flowers, though she rather liked the huge wine-coloured ones like sheep dogs.

Would she, now that she was home again, find rest in the cool soft arms of Helen's Court? She wondered. At first the dim loveliness had seemed a balm to her. Then, like figures in a nightmare hiding behind doors, memories had popped out and said "boo." She must purge the shadows of their ghosts, force the vases and carpets and chairs to be vases and carpets and chairs again, not things that she had noticed when she was happy, little vivid patches of past hours.

A little boy was sitting under a tree making a whistle——

If only——

The pain stabbed her. Did wanting things bring them nearer or put them further away? In a sense perhaps the very fact of wanting them gave them to you. What is in your thoughts is already real, a part of your life. And yet a longing is such an emphasis, a perpetual reminder of what you haven't got, a knocking every tap of which reveals the hollowness within.

"But our hopes are our only real achievements," she argued with herself, and then thought desolately, "What do I know? Nothing."

Once again she remembered Heine's poem.

"Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam
Im Norden auf kahler Höh,
Ihn schläfert. Mit weisser Decke
Umhüllen ihn Eis und Schnee.
Er traumt von einer Palme,
Die fern im Morgenland
Einsam und schweigend trauert
Auf brennender Felsenwand."

And the palm was dreaming of the fir. The burning desert and the icy heights were the same thing. Each a torture and each a dream.

"Perhaps," thought Helen, "that is the solution. To know that all the knowledge in the world can never kill one illusion, that the sameness of everything is killed by each dream."

She felt curiously happier. As she reached the house Cyril came towards her, buoyant and boyish, happiness in his eye, lightness in his step. He drew her arm through his.

"Darling," he said.

The strain had come back into her eyes. She smiled up into his face. After all she had served only three months of her life sentence of responding.

"It will come more and more naturally," she said to herself every day.

"I feel ten years younger than I did in July," he

said. "I wonder if mother will notice that I am nicer. Or am I altogether too smeared in her own colours."

Then, and this was the measure of the distance that he had travelled, "I hope she will," he added.

Helen felt a choking sensation in her throat.

Passionately, with all her ardent tortured longing, she said "Cyril, I *love* you." And she did, in every way except the one way, the only way that could help her.

Jean had come out onto the terrace.

"*Madame la Comtesse est servie,*" he announced.

"Please," Cyril said, "go on ahead—I want to look at you."

THE END

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